Faye Business Systems Group

CRM + TMS Integration

CRM + TMS INTEGRATION

To improve efficiency and realize the goal of a 360-degree customer and shipment view, it's vital for companies to connect their customer relationship management (CRM) and transportation management system (TMS) programs.

In this white paper, we examine the benefits of integrating CRM and TMS, and we discuss the data points a company should carry from one program to another.

The best way to reach a customer is to have a clear understanding of:

- Who the customer is
- What their needs are
- How often and how much they need
- What their preferred method of communication is

The entire goal of a CRM system is to have a 360-degreee view of your customer. But a typical CRM system doesn't have all the data companies need, in order to fully understand the transport needs of each customer.

CRM is the front-office system of a business, since it holds all its information on customers. Meanwhile, TMS is a logistics platform that deals with the planning, execution, and optimization of the daily operations of transportation fleets.

While syncing your CRM and TMS systems can be critical, you don't need to transfer all the data from one program to another. Some syncs should be unidirectional, while others should be bidirectional. (These terms will be further defined later in this white paper.)

By properly syncing a company's TMS and CRM, your team, customer, and carriers will all be on the same page (or rather, the same software). Since this integration will provide excellent insight into the data you need to best serve your customers, you'll be free to go after new prospects and loads.

This connection also lends itself to more accurate business forecasting, and it creates a better overall CRM strategy. By combining these powerhouses of technology and information, you can more effectively understand your customers' needs and keep your employees happy by giving convenient, quick access to knowledge that will help them streamline their everyday workflows.

But how does a company sync data between these two systems? What data points should you pull, and what will that data be used for? What are the best practices for integration? Can my sales team change invoicing if they can see them in the system? (Don't worry. Just because they can see it doesn't mean they can alter anything.)

We'll answer these questions below, but we'll start with a more basic question...

What Is TMS?

TMS systems are of the utmost importance to many businesses in the transportation industry. Why? Because they are specifically designed to streamline the shipping process. The reason why TMS complements CRM so well is because it automates processes and gives you valuable insights about them. But instead of providing knowledge related to sales and customer service, a TMS system provides insight that will allow you to save time and reduce spend on future shipments.

For example, with a TMS system, freight shippers can take a deep dive into bettering their quoting processes for each delivery. They can see if loads were previously affected by seasons changing or around certain holidays. Ultimately, they can take a look at the historical data they've collected about routes and customers and make educated decisions about the future.

The benefits of TMS include:

- Instead of sifting through various databases, you can determine routing decisions based on quotes, transit time, and carrier mix—which are all easily accessible in one place.
- Evaluate merchandise being sent and match it with a carrier in your network.
- Want to see the last carrier you used for a specific customer? No problem. You can take a peek at a past shipment, then match similar loads to applicable carriers.
- Simplify the confusion of different carriers and routes by housing all the tracking information in a centralized location.
- Understand carrier rates by having the ability to look back at rates and delivery times year over year, in order to compare them and take the guesswork out of choosing carriers.

Top Reasons to Integrate CRM and TMS

The integration of CRM and TMS is key to truly understanding your customers' needs. You landed a new client, and you're transporting a new load. Great, right? But that's not the end of the story. That new client is still a prospect for all their other loads.

When you sync these two systems together, you have access to all this information about your customer: shipment statuses, historical data about orders, payments, warehouse inventories, current rates, overdue items, and overviews of the customer journey.

Rather than switching programs to access this information, the data is now stored in a single program. This feature can be useful in many situations. For example, if a member of your sales team is performing a quarterly check-in with a customer, the salesperson may need to answer questions about past records and see the status of a current shipment or load, in order to get an overall feel of the customer journey.

If you've integrated your CRM and TMS, all this information is available in one system. So the sales representative doesn't have to repeatedly switch programs to access the relevant data.

In addition to saving the sales team's time, integrating the CRM and TMS systems saves time during data entry. Instead of manually copying data from CRM and keying it into TMS, the information automatically transfers. And since there's no need to duplicate data, there are fewer data-entry errors.

Quicker access to information is especially important if a sales rep or technician needs to help a customer when he or she is out in the field. Perhaps a client asks for information about past orders, or a technician needs to look up a protocol for leasing equipment or a specific tariff schedule.

This type of request can be a huge hassle if your information is not synced. It would involve sifting through database after database. The previously mentioned technician could look unknowledgeable and inefficient while he tries to find answers on his mobile device.

Integrating your CRM with your TMS creates a better user experience on desktops, laptops, and mobile devices. If you simultaneously use an email application, CRM, TMS, messaging system, and other programs, your user experience could get watered down. So integrating CRM and TMS improves the experience, as long as users adopt the improved system. A successful integration can help solve cascading problems, including staleness of data, problems with user entry, and lack of business intelligence.

Integrating these two systems can also help navigate interior controls. If your TMS and CRM aren't connected, some employees might end up in programs they shouldn't really be using, while they're trying to access data they need. For example, if a member of the sales team needs to view a quote, he or she will likely have to navigate into the accounting system. But ideally, only members of the accounting team should be accessing this program.

By integrating these two platforms, information is easier to access in the proper systems, so interior controls are easier to maintain.

In addition, TMS/CRM integration helps eliminate silos, since all information is accessible in one place. This feature also improves visibility about important shipping information. Armed with this data, a company can produce more accurate delivery times, rates, orders, and quotes.

After combining TMS and CRM data, you can see important business and customer information, which can help facilitate forecasting and business intelligence. If you've worked with a customer for many years, you can see a summation of past orders/shipments for a specific amount of time (such as three years), which is critical for forecasting high-priority customer statuses.

In other words, you can understand where your revenue is coming from. This task would be much harder without combining CRM information (which includes the possibility of creating an outline from forecasts) and TMS information (which includes rates and shipments.)

Overall, merging CRM and TMS data leads to improved productivity and efficiency. Every company is striving to reach certain metrics. By combining the data from these two systems, you can drive these metrics in the right direction and help companies reach their goals.

Many businesses within transportation and logistics can reap rewards from integrating their CRM and TMS systems. They include:

- Shippers
- Brokers
- Carriers
- Forwarders
- 3PLs
- Distribution companies
- E-commerce organizations

What Data Should I Integrate, and How?

There are two types of data integration. Information can either move in a single direction (unidirectional) or back and forth between systems (bidirectional). In a unidirectional connection, data flows from one system into the other, and it is available in a read-only format in the second system. Typically, data flows from TMS into CRM.

Data can be pulled from one program as frequently as you deem necessary— whether it be once a week, every hour, or every few minutes. The frequency of data integration varies from business to business. Generally speaking, you should begin your integration by syncing less frequently, seeing how the data is used, and progressing from there. Start with baby steps, and work your way up.

You can integrate your information with APIs, or you can manually load the information. At the beginning of the process, don't be afraid to use a CSV file to transfer data. That way, you can test the integration to see how the shared data is used.

The data you transfer between systems will vary, depending on your business and the needs of the end-user. To figure out which data you should share, consider what the end-users are requesting.

For instance:

- What information does your team need?
- What data will they use?
- What information do you need, in order to get a complete 360-degree customer view?

In reality, most of the information the end-user is asking for is usually the same data across-the-board, but it needs to be presented in different ways. To help streamline the TMS/CRM connection process, start by transferring the data from the TMS into the CRM, then slice up the information for the end-user as needed. After you've integrated the data into the CRM, parse it into the format the end-user prefers.

Some common items transferred between systems include:

- Customer Data
- Accounts and Contacts
- Quotes, Orders, and Invoices
- Payments
- Shipping Status

- Current Rates
- Tariff Schedules
- Historical Sales Data
- Warehouse Inventory

As a best practice of general integration, keep your data connection simple. Only transfer information your team will use. You can use data intelligence, or you can use any business-intelligence tool (such as Domo or Tableau) to analyze the information.

Consider how your individual teams will use the data you're pulling over. How will the sales team use it? What about your service team? What will the marketing department do with this information?

Some businesses get confused when they integrate CRM/TMS information. Which system contains the master data record? They lose track. So beware the rabbit hole that can swallow you up when you start changing data in both programs. Choose one program that will house the most recent information. Usually, it's CRM. By having a master record, businesses worry less about where to place data, and how to transfer it when they have to change a record (such as a customer's phone number or address).

Conclusion

Many transportation and logistics firms can benefit from combining their customer and shipment-management information into one system. Whether you're a 3PL, distribution company, or carrier, you can better realize the goal of CRM strategy and have better discussions about business intelligence by integrating your data into one system.

To provide a full view of your customers, reduce data errors, and provide a better user experience, it's critical to connect your CRM and TMS systems. This integration also grants better visibility into shipping, makes it easier to use data for forecasting and BI, eliminates silos, and improves productivity and efficiency.

If you have any questions about CRM implementation (including the benefits of specific modules or the costs of developing a solution for your business), feel free to contact us at FayeBSG.

About FayeBSG

Faye Business Systems Group is a technology consulting and software company that helps companies grow by working with them to implement, customize and integrate innovative and effective financial and business systems. As a SugarCRM Elite partner and awarded the 2018 SugarCRM Global Reseller of the Year, FayeBSG is also a leading partner with Sage, Zendesk, Acumatica, Ytel, Hubspot and a variety of custom software solutions.

FayeBSG is known for their SugarCRM integrations with Sage 100, Quickbooks, NetSuite, Acumatica, Intacct, Constant Contact, Authorize.Net, HubSpot, Ring Central, Box, Jira, Ytel, and more. Services include project management, software implementations, consulting, training, custom development, and support.

Specializing in software implementations for a variety of industries, FayeBSG has customized successful CRM and ERP platforms for a variety of mid-market and enterprise businesses.