SELECTING A CAD/RMS VENDOR

The choice you make for a CAD and records system ***matters.***

YOUR CHOICE MATTERS

It matters because your system is used by every member of your department every day. The system's operation and your personnel's satisfaction with it directly impact the performance and morale of your department.

It matters because you want your system to be considered an indispensable tool, not something people have to put up with and complain about until you inevitably have to replace it. And it matters because the wrong choice can have real life consequences.

Choosing a system is not like buying a patrol car or office furniture. A CAD and records system is not a commodity product. There is no such thing as a generic CAD/RMS; systems vary widely in their capabilities and reliability. When making a selection, there is no substitute for good, thorough, careful homework.

So how do you go about making that selection?

It comes down to the assessment of just three major factors… three things that you must carefully examine when evaluating vendors:

» Reputation » Product » Price

Reputation

Vendor reputation is the single most important factor in determining the likelihood of long term satisfaction with a vendor and their product.

A vendor's reputation is not the same as being "well known." Nor does reputation have anything to do with the size of the company, the glossiness of their brochures, their advertising budget, or their slick sales people. Reputation has everything to do with customer satisfaction. If other agencies don't like the product, you likely won't either. If everyone using a product is wildly enthusiastic about it, you too will probably be enthusiastic.

The bottom line: No matter how well known the vendor or how flashy the product – if agencies using it are not happy with it, will your agency be happy?

If the single most important step in vendor selection is determining vendor reputations, how do you go about doing this?

You must:

1. ***Call agencies using the software.*** Do not limit yourself to two or three names the vendor offers. It's too easy for a vendor to pick *(possibly few)* sites that they know will give them a decent, if not glowing, recommendation. Instead, insist on the name and numbers for 10, preferably 20 sites. Then call them all and ask the "how do you like it?" question in multiple ways to make sure you get candid, complete answers about their satisfaction with the product and the vendor's post-sale service and support. For example, call their dispatch center during off hours, talk to their patrol personnel and talk to their records people.

2. ***For vendors who pass step one above, move on to site visits.*** Visit at least three sites using the vendor's software. Ask detailed questions as you determine both the satisfaction levels of the users you meet and how well the system will meet your particular needs.

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Product

First, here are some critically important DON'Ts:

- ***Don't*** buy promises. If you can't see it, don't buy it.
- ***Don't*** buy software from a vendor who proposes to customize it to your exact needs. That is a sure recipe for long term unhappiness – a system that will take forever to install, will give you nothing but problems, and will rarely, if ever, be updated because it is unique to you.
- ***Don't*** buy a product because it uses this year's latest Microsoft software gizmos *(sounds good – but those gizmos are irrelevant to your operation)*.
- ***Don't*** be a beta-test site for a vendor's hot new, just-developed product. Which do you think will be more reliable and have more features, a brand new product or one that has been in use and been continually expanded for many years?

In evaluating the vendor's software, besides the information you gather from your site visits, you will of course want to interview the vendor and see a demonstration of their products.

Here are a few DO's:

- ***Do*** have the demonstration at your site, not theirs.
- **Do** have representatives of all your various user groups present, at least for the parts of the demonstration that affect each.
- ***Do*** be prepared with a list of detailed questions about the product – ask a lot. Do not accept evasive answers.
- ***Do*** ask them to show you what they tell you, using their software, not a Power Point presentation.
- ***Do*** come prepared with scenarios of what you want to see in a demonstration of how the system works. That way you gain control of the demonstration and prevent the vendor from glossing over the weak points in their system. A good scenario that covers a lot of territory is "Show us an example of a call for service being entered, officers being dispatched, people and plates being run, an officer entering the resulting report with an arrest, and the report being reviewed and approved."
- ***Do*** find out which of the features they show you are "included" and which are extra cost options.
- ***Do*** ask the vendor how frequently new versions of the software are released. Request a detailed list of all enhancements made to the product in the past three versions and in which years those versions were released.
- ***Do*** ask about the history of the software being proposed — Was it developed by this vendor or did they buy it from someone else? Often a vendor acquiring software from another vendor ends up having a short-term commitment to it, leading with it just to try and get you buy an expensive "upgrade" to another of its products within a few years.

$ Price

Ask for a firm quotation – and if the quote has a "good until" date, make sure it's clear. If the vendor says it can't give you a firm quote "at this time," – ask why. There is no reason the vendor shouldn't be able to give you an exact quote for the software/system you're asking for. Exceptions to this would be few – but would include the inclusion of items that cannot yet be pinned down in detail…such as a link to another system or device requiring additional research to be accurately priced. Insist on estimates for what you want – do not let them give you excuses for not providing a quotation. If the vendor won't tell you the price it's because they know you won't like it.

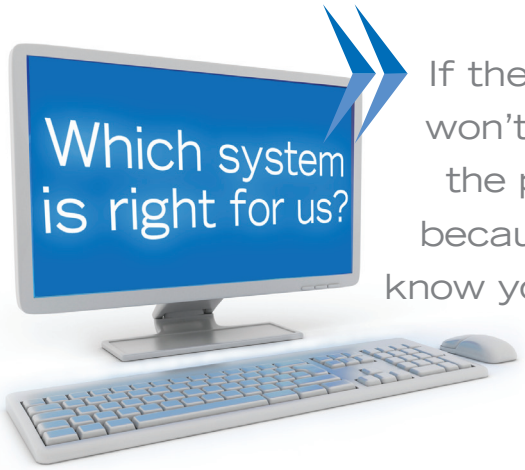
When reviewing a quotation, make sure it covers all the bases:

- Make sure everything you have discussed as requirements are included. If you have any doubts, ask for an updated quotation that resolves them.
- Consider not just the purchase price, but also the ongoing costs:
  - Is the annual support cost reasonable? *(Support costs vary widely.)*
  - What is and is not included in the annual support cost? Does it include all software updates and new versions? Does implementation of new versions require the vendor's assistance? Is there a cost?
- Are there any third party products or equipment you will be required to buy that are not included in the quotation?
- Is conversion of your existing data included?
- Are you going to incur significant manpower costs to manage the system?

A high price does not necessarily mean you are buying a better product.

And conversely, if the price seems too good *(low)* to be true, then it probably is.

Price should not be the overall deciding factor unless the quotation is so far beyond your budget that it immediately takes an otherwise favorable product out of the running.



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CHOOSING A WINNER

Once you have completed your homework – evaluated vendors on reputation, product, and price – now it's decision time. You may find that your evaluation has made the decision obvious, or perhaps not. It is often useful to be able to quantify your assessments of vendors with a numeric score.

Here is a simple, straightforward way to score your candidates. Assign a 0-5 score *(based on the tables below)* for each vendor in each of the three categories of reputation, product and price. Then add up the score for each vendor and see which one comes out on top.

Reputation
Score Description

- **5** *Absolutely excellent – everyone recommends this vendor without reservation*
- **4** *Almost everyone recommends this vendor, but there are exceptions*
- **3** *The majority of agencies are satisfied with this vendor*
- **2** *Fewer than half of this vendor's clients are satisfied*
- **1** *Most agencies do not like this vendor*
- **0** *Everyone who has this vendor's product has serious issues with it*

Product
Score Description

- **5** *The best; perfect for us*
- **4** *Very good; a couple of things could be better*
- **3** *OK, but nothing to get excited about*
- **2** *A step below most other products*
- **1** *Many deficiencies*
- **0** *No redeeming value*

Price
Score Description

- **5** *Unquestionably an excellent value*
- **4** *Generally a good value*
- **3** *Price is OK*
- **2** *Price to value could be better*
- **1** *High price with many gotchas*
- **0** *Price is absurdly high*

Product: _____

NOTES:

Reputation ☐ Product ☐ Price ☐ TOTAL SCORE ☐

Product: _____

NOTES:

Reputation ☐ Product ☐ Price ☐ TOTAL SCORE ☐

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NOTES:

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