



---

## **Commence Corporation**

### **A Better Value than the Giants in the CRM Space?**

July 2004

**By Jim Meade, Ph.D**  
**Industry Analyst**

As a software reviewer I have spent more than a decade looking at business solutions for the enterprise and mid-market space. While all the hype and fanfare traditionally surround the mainstream players, every so often I come across a smaller, less-known company whose products do an even better job than the big players of meeting the functional and financial requirements of the customers they serve. In Human Resource software an unknown company like NuView Systems of Wilmington, MA will go head-to-head with giant PeopleSoft or Oracle, for example, and sometimes win. In payroll, unknowns like OPEN4 of Addison, TX or Genesys Software of Methuen, MA win accounts from known giants like ADP and Ceridian.

I have recently found the same unexpected power and value to be available from lesser-known providers in the Customer Relationship Management (CRM) space. While we industry analysts and gurus tend to pay homage to the big guns like Siebel and Microsoft, smaller companies like Commence Corporation of Tinton Falls, NJ that may not appear on our analyst radar screen are quietly meeting customer needs in the CRM sector.

Commence has been supporting the business requirements of small to mid-size companies for more than a decade and has an impressive track record for delivering quality products and services. Positioned squarely between low-end contact managers and costly, overly complex higher-end solutions, Commence CRM strikes a nice balance among functionality, ease of use, and low cost of ownership.

#### **Full Range of Applications**

The company offers a full suite of applications from contact management and sales automation to marketing campaign management and customer support (or help desk). In a nice marketing stroke, the applications are modular in design yet fully integrated, so you can purchase just what you need. I found the product's functionality to rival that of many higher-end solutions costing thousands of dollars more.

Commence Corporation's long history as a provider of database management tools is apparent when looking at the underlying architecture of the product, which is easy to customize without programmer intervention. End users can even personalize their individual desktops to the way they work. The well-designed, flexible interface makes the system intuitive and user friendly. The architecture also does an excellent job of supporting the client not connected to the server. Commence offers a utility called "Sync Link," which enables an authorized end user to copy database information to a laptop or hand held device for remote use. The user can update the remote device with FTP synchronization, e-mail, or VPN.

The Contact Management component of Commence is quite robust and similar in design to offerings from mainstream CRM companies, meaning it's account centric as opposed to contact centric as in less powerful systems. A feature, called connection controls, allows you to link one-to-many or many-to-many relationships. With connection controls, for example, you can manage and track multiple companies or multiple partners that may be involved in an opportunity or a project. This linking is a powerful differentiator and one I have not seen in other CRM products.

The Sales automation system supports lead management, opportunity or pipeline management, telesales/telemarketing, forecasting, and reporting; and it meets the functional checklist of traditional mid-market sales force automation systems. One of the product's strengths is the ability to deploy automated business processes. Sales people, for instance, can ask the system to identify any potential opportunity that has not had any activity linked to it for a period of time, such as a telephone call, direct mail piece, or on-site meeting. They can then direct the automated business process to automatically perform a function such as send a fax, letter, or press release based on "what if" scenarios. Commence also enables the company to incorporate a standard sales methodology for managing pipeline activity or create its own if one is already established.

### **Addressing Special Needs of Small to Midsize Business**

The Marketing application does a good job of supporting campaign management. Customers can plan a campaign, establish a budget, assign tasks, estimate results, and track responses. They can incorporate mailing lists within the product, making it easy to update the lists and also track marketing cost and activity by prospect. The marketing application is fully integrated with the sales system, enabling the automatic transfer of leads from marketing to the appropriate sales representative or sales team.

The Support or Help Desk module very capably manages service tickets, contracts, and problem resolution. The system tracks call duration and can quickly associate contracts and service levels with products purchased. I like the mail merge feature that enables a support representative to notify and provide a

documented resolution via e-mail to customers. The application also incorporates a comprehensive knowledgebase feature that allows the support rep to attach an article to a service ticket for easy and fast problem resolution. (The product does not, however, enable customers to access this knowledgebase without purchasing an add-on component.)

Commence has a robust report writer built into the product, and each application comes with a large number of pre-built reports. The company states that the custom report writer reduces the cost and reliance on third-party reporting products such as Crystal Reports. While the product does free the user from such reliance on outside vendors, the lack of analytical reporting that evaluates customer buying trends and patterns as provided in higher end systems is a weakness in Commence. (The company indicates that such reporting is planned for its next release.)

Commence also supports desktop integration with seamless links to desktop applications like MS Word and MS Outlook.

During the past twelve months we industry analysts have begun to take an increased interest in small to mid-size business (SMB). Reports indicate that the SMB space is underserved and that the requirements of smaller businesses are significantly different from enterprise companies. We have been asserting that ease of implementation and use, along with a low cost of ownership, are the driving factors for the purchase of CRM systems among the small to mid-size business community.

Companies like Siebel and others have made attempts to scale down their solutions and costs to better serve these requirements but have failed to achieve their goal, and, while web based solutions seem to be growing in popularity, client server-based systems like Commence CRM are delivering on the promise for functionality, ease of use, and value for small to midsized companies.

Bigger, then, does not always mean better. Nor is fame any guarantee of quality, though in the world of software it generally is the basis for higher pricing. For companies looking for a comprehensive, easy-to-use solution at an attractive price point, this is one CRM solution worth further investigation.

---

*Jim Meade, Ph.D., is author of The Human Resources Software Handbook: Evaluating Technology Solutions for Your Organization, published with John Wiley Publishing. He has a 20 year history in the software industry, has reviewed more than 100 software packages for magazines such as Human Resource Magazine, and is author of 24 books on computers, including several in the bestselling Dummies series.*