

Tips for Buying Computer “Solutions”

by Bill Kopelcheck

It can be one of your most important decisions, and one of the most intimidating: Purchasing the right computer system. Bill Kopelcheck of Labyrinth Business Solutions in Newport, Rhode Island, a leading provider of jewelry-specific software, offers the following tips to ensure your computer purchase provides exactly what your jewelry operation needs.

1. Conduct an internal analysis.

Before looking for a new system, you and your staff should diagram all of your processes: your work-flow patterns; how orders are received, processed, and fulfilled; how decisions are made and relayed. Does your company have a workforce that is computer literate—and if not, is a training

program in place? Is your existing system meeting all of these needs, or is it creaking under the weight of your workload? Knowing this will give you an idea of what you need in your new system, and a realistic expectation of what it will take to install.

You also need to look ahead. What's your anticipated sales volume? Do you anticipate adding new functions, such as electronic data interchange (EDI) or e-commerce? In my experience, every

five to eight years a jewelry company will typically start the hunt for a totally new system to accommodate these changes. But if it plans properly, it will need only to update its existing system—and save thousands of dollars.

2. Price out a “solution” rather than just software.

At the core of any system are the modules for accounting, manufacturing, inventory control, EDI, and customer service, among others. This software, combined with a proven project plan and consulting specific to jewelry businesses, defines the meaning of “solution.” When choosing the software, make sure the modules can perform functions specific to the jewelry industry, such as market pricing, lot control, toll metal recaps, dynamic diamond control, and memo, and can also be integrated and modified as needed.

3. Choose a provider that knows your industry.

Do your homework—not just about the system, but also about the company that will do the installation. Does it understand the types of product lines you

sell, and the customers you may deal with? If you consign goods, does the company understand the concept of memo? You'll also want a provider that has solutions specific to your industry and that continually enhances its product line. As the jewelry industry changes, those changes should be reflected in your provider's offerings. From the newest e-commerce interfaces to operating system updates, your solution will need constant attention. And you'll want to work with a company that rolls out these upgrades on a regular basis—so you won't have to reinvent the wheel.

4. Demand a demo — and get staff buy-in.

Before making any decision, ask the provider to give your staff (including management) a demonstration. To make the demo more focused to your staff's needs, give the provider some sample information specific to your company—for example, the names of three customers along with three items they “ordered” (including images, increments, and a bill of materials). Make sure the demo shows exactly what the solution can do with jewelry-specific situations. Your company's info will ultimately make the system more understandable—and acceptable—to your staff.

5. Phase-in the installation of your solution.

The old saying “Don't bite off more than you can chew” applies here. Divide the project into phases, and be realistic about the time and effort that installation will take. For every hour a provider works with a customer, that customer spends three hours on tasks such as identifying and discussing new options, editing data before it's transferred, and, studying system operation, and training. If you take your time, you'll eliminate costly delays, save dollars, and avoid overall chaos.



TAKE TOTAL CONTROL

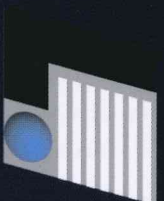
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