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Once you know how...

Nine Key Recommendations
for succeeding with PIM

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Over the last nine years, we have guided many companies through their PIM implementations, and in that time we have learned the success factors needed, and the pitfalls you should avoid. In this guide we have compiled nine key recommendations that we hope will help you get the most out of your investment in PIM.

Before we start

PIM stands for Product Information Management, and involves collecting all the information and material you use in marketing in one single place, with your customers' needs in focus at all times, whether this involves textual material, product images, procedures, product sheets, videos, properties, selling arguments, or more. A PIM system can create significant capabilities for you to work more efficiently, and support your business – when it is used in the right way.

1. Always start from your business, and your customers' needs

It's easy to make the classic mistake of using only existing structures to create product information based on a perspective looking from the inside out. Don't do it! Think instead of the type of information your customers need for them to continue on their purchase journey.

What function does the material serve? Do you want to build your brand or convert? What type of target audience do you have? Have you defined your marketing personas? Start with your marketing plan and let it drive how you organise your material in PIM.

An example: Outdoor & Sports shops have two primary target audiences. One makes their decisions based on factual arguments, such as the volume of a backpack, its function, and its material. For these, you want to provide concise information with technical details Nine Key Recommendations for succeeding with PIM 3/8 to entice the purchase decision. The other target group cares little about technical aspects, but rather is more attracted by lifestyle and image.

You convince them by putting your products into an emotional context, as with the hiker climbing a mountain lit from behind or other situations where your products are used. The long detailed product descriptions you have in your files just do not attract either of these primary targets. Our recommendation to the Outdoors & Sports shop is therefore to refocus their priority so their customers are met by the appropriate message, and stop wasting time maintaining information that fails to generate business. Let your marketing plan be in control.

2. Ask the question:
What do we gain by having a PIM?

A PIM system works for companies that have a wide variety of products. So, for a company that launches five new products per year, it's probably not economically acceptable to invest in PIM. To determine whether a PIM is a profitable investment, you can ask the following questions:

- What does the production of marketing material cost today, and what would it cost using a PIM?
- How many people work with the production and maintenance of printed material, e-trade, and the website today?
- Do operations support additional costs linked to producing product information?
- How many claims are based on customers having the wrong expectations due to getting poor product information?
- How much time does customer service spend on answering questions about products that could have been answered by more complete product information?
- Do we need so much marketing material that it is worthwhile to automate the production?
- Is an agency involved – can we reduce the number of proofing rounds?
- How much can we shorten the time to market when launching new products?

What you gain by using a PIM system depends on several factors related to size of assortment, your customers' needs, and on your existing work processes.

3. Appoint a steering committee and a process owner

Working with PIM is a long term project that requires clear roles. Building a fully effective PIM solution requires the involvement of many participants who can contribute to its design. Start by identifying everyone who has an interest in this, and then set up a complete steering committee. Crucially, make sure the PIM process is owned by someone from marketing.

This marketing figure should then invite key individuals from (say) IT, Sales, Assortment and Purchasing to establish this steering committee. The steering committee has an important task in taking the long view and working continually with PIM.

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4. Set KPIs that highlight customer values

The best control instruments for a successful investment in PIM are well-defined KPIs. The steering committee must continually keep these in mind, and they should concentrate on customer values. Good examples of KPIs include:

- Greater customer loyalty
- Higher conversion rates
- Greater share of satisfied customers
- Reduced returns
- Reduced times for customer service

An example: How many customers interrupt their on-line purchasing journey because they don't find information about the product? Do customers search for a name that isn't in the database? Can a customer search for 'backpack', when you call it 'camping gear''?

Make sure to measure the work and preferably, start actively with a single product segment. Then, take one area after the other.

5. Put power in the hands of marketing

The marketing department has the best understanding of your customers and their purchasing journey, so they must be in charge of communication in every channel. The rest of the organisation is there to help create the material, but it is marketing that decide what PIM will include. As we stated previously, it is crucial that a person from marketing owns the process.

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If PIM is filled with complicated facts from various parts of the organisation, the customers' needs may end up being ignored, and the marketing department is forced to spend time maintaining information that has no bearing on forthcoming marketing activities.

6. Remember that PIM is PIM and nothing else

PIM is about collecting information and material used for marketing into a single location, with the customer's needs in focus at all times. Leave it there! PIM is PIM, and shouldn't be confused with (say) PLM (Product Life-cycle Management), which involves the product's entire lifecycle. PIM is a sub-process in that entire lifecycle that addresses marketing.

Nor should you mix in parts involving MDM (Master Data Management), since this involves supplier management, data consolidation, pricing, and inventory control, and other things not directly involved with marketing.

The information used in PIM can be taken from other systems, but only if it is really useful for the customer. It is easy to want too much, and let the system balloon to manage other kinds of information that is really not related to marketing.

7. Engage people - technology is rarely the problem

The first challenge when using PIM is to get everyone to understand their role in the process. The technology is never the problem in complex PIM solutions, it is the culture and friction between people that can get in the way.

When an organisation is still not using omnichannel sales and the responsibility for marketing activities in various channels remains with different departments, PIM requires a new approach to collaboration. It is extremely important that every person understands the value of their part in the process and that everyone involved understands the purpose of PIM.

This is where the steering committee has an important task; they must communicate the vision, describe the whole, and open their employees' eyes. Everyone gains time, and quality is improved when everyone contributes, and shares – and when they dare to release information that is important to the context. To succeed, you need clear guidelines as to who does what, most often through dialogue and workshops at a detailed level. This is a new way of working, and don't underestimate the importance of communicating this fully internally.

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8. Implement in small stages

When it's time for implementation, don't try to do everything at once; instead, break your overall objectives into smaller projects. Look at the work process, choose your starting point and then create your own roadmap. Where is your business most affected? Start with a single product category, one department, or a single channel, but even here, start by thinking from the customer's perspective.

Is there any product group that lacks good information? Does an inefficient department or procedure cause an unnecessary long wait for the customer? At the risk of nagging: Always keep the customer perspective in mind.

9. Dare to go standard

Now it's crunch time. With an effective PIM system come new processes that the organisation must adapt to. It takes a longer time to ROI for the solution if your operations fail to simplify everything and start using standard work processes. Dare to look at how others have done it, and don't reinvent the wheel. Some examples:

- Work smarter with texts. Do not differentiate between catalogue and web texts, but rather, create short and long descriptions that can be used in different channels.
- Think independently of channel when considering images.
- Manage translations through the system, not in each channel.

Trust it to work, because it saves lots of time

Do you want more ideas?

PIM, when used in the right way, can help your operations save time, money, and energy. With the right information in the right place, enabling the production of marketing material in a smart way, you have a good start on improving customer satisfaction and conversions. And your organisation gains time for what is really important.

Contact us to get more ideas on how to use PIM and on how you can best maximise its usefulness to your organisation.

About Columbus

Columbus is a global IT services and consulting corporation with more than 2,000 employees serving our customers worldwide. We bring digital transformation into your business and position you to thrive far into the future.

We are experts in designing, developing, implementing, upgrading and maintaining digital business applications that help your business succeed in the digital transformation. Our consultants have experience in developing businesses in many different industries all over the world.

We offer a comprehensive solution portfolio with deep industry knowledge, extensive technology expertise and profound customer insight. We have proven this through 29 years of experience serving more than 5,000 customers worldwide.

Let us help you realize the full potential of your business.