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DreamForce 2013: How to Get the Most From a Massive Conference

– David Taber, CIO

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More than 1,000 classroom-style presentations, plus another 1,000 informal sessions, monopolizing nine San Francisco city blocks. Roughly 350 vendors giving away two (or is it three?) cars, not to mention kilotons of tchotchkes. Keynotes from Fortune 500 CEOs and the occasional Prime Minister. CNBC Mad Money filming on site. So many vendor parties that you need a separate app just to schedule them. A main party featuring Green Day, performing at AT&T Park with nearly 42,000 fans.

In other words, Dreamforce 2013 is a zoo. But it's also a serious show of force from the 800-pound gorilla that is Salesforce.com. That, of course, is the point: Making the business user comfortable with Salesforce as a safe buy.

Through its acquisitions and organic development, Salesforce.com finally has truly credible offerings in marketing automation to complement its leadership elsewhere. This isn't to say that the system is right for everybody; there's no such thing in CRM.

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Indeed, Saleforce.com turns lemons into lemonade, having mastered the art of "the right imperfections" that leave nice opportunities for independent software vendors and service integrators to make strategic bets. Keeping enough opportunity to stimulate the market without leaving too much money on the table is a balancing act that few platform vendors have managed to achieve over long periods.

Dreamforce Tech Sessions Offer More Than Business Case Studies

That checks the "political" box, but what about technical content of the conference? It should be no surprise that there are countless sessions for the low-level developer as well sa the system administrator. In addition, the Salesforce.com platform has attracted some serious partners and open-source projects. A surprising number of libraries and coding tools for the DIY shop now exist, and there are lots of sessions covering those strange new animals.

There are also a gratifying number of higher-level technical sessions, including best practices for coding constructs, better scalability and safer system administration. The developer community is getting much more serious about using Salesforce as a platform for business apps that go way beyond the domain of traditional CRM.

One important hint: Most tech sessions include code samples embedded in the slides. Most of the presenters don't post their decks online for several weeks, so you'll want to schedule a couple of hours over the holidays to download the content you couldn't read in real time. (Of course, these and other downloads are available only to paid attendees.)

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Finally, there are scores of "business best practice" sessions. These vary in quality from a blatant sales pitch to a management guidance discussion. For most tech conference organizers, these are the most revered sessions. The business audience rates them highly because the vendor isn't speaking. I get it that testimonials are important. To me, though, these are always of dubious value, as the "lessons learned" are only narrowly applicable.

It's fine to hear about customer connectedness at Burberry or Coca-Cola, but how many in the audience are making raincoats or sugar-water? The stories may be inspirational, but they aren't as actionable as the rest of the Dreamforce conference content.

David Taber is the author of the Prentice Hall book, Salesforce.com Secrets of Success, now in its second edition, and is the CEO of SalesLogistix, a certified Salesforce.com consultancy focused on business process improvement through use of CRM systems. SalesLogistix clients are in North America, Europe, Israel and India. Taber has more than 25 years of experience in high tech, including 10 years at the VP level or above.

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