

CHOOSING YOUR PLM PARTNER:
WHY INNOVATION IS THE KEY
TO A PERFECT MATCH

Why is the choice of PLM partner so important to the success of your business?

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Competition among brands and retailers is more intense than ever. Businesses that thrive constantly work to stay ahead and move quickly to respond to market shifts. Companies across the fashion, apparel, outdoor and consumer goods industries must now adopt new tools and tactics that will drive traffic across all channels. The retail winners create innovative product offerings, staying engaged with consumers and harnessing the power of technology to develop products.

Product Lifecycle Management (PLM) solutions are fundamental digital tools for brands and retailers to stay ahead of the game. The right PLM solution can effectively manage every aspect of design and product development, from initial concept to manufacturing and sell-in. Enhanced visibility, a 'single source of truth' system to hold product data and access to real-time information cuts lead times, improves communication with internal and external teams, reduces manual data entry, speeds time to market and, as a long-term investment, sets the foundation for growth for multi-billion dollar companies and emerging, start-up brands alike. PLM is at once an operational and strategic solution.

No matter how many cool features software has, technology is ultimately a tool that enables individuals and to do more and do better. Product teams need software that empowers them to be nimble and agile so they can be both reactive and innovative to propel businesses forward to the next-level of growth.

FINDING A PARTNER THAT EVOLVES WITH YOUR BUSINESS

The ideal PLM partner should also constantly innovate, with new releases and best practices to keep pace. If not, your PLM solution becomes outdated over time as new business practices emerge. Before you know it, you are looking for a new PLM vendor or your teams have slipped back into old ways of working with spreadsheets and email attachments. Time to market gets longer, errors are made and product quality goes down. Eventually, you become less competitive and flexible and your bottom line suffers. When your business has invested in something as large and complex as a PLM system, it's the last place you want to end up.

Choosing a PLM vendor is the start of a long-term partnership and a decision that you want to make sure is a good fit on both sides. Will you grow together, or will you have to implement new software or add on code to stay current? It's important to choose a partner that pours resources into innovation and shares frequent updates and key developments. Retail changes in the blink of an eye: PLM should be able to do the same.

There are some telltale signs to watch out for when choosing a PLM partner so we've created a vendor checklist for daily users and for your IT and business leaders to help you think about critical questions you should ask during your PLM partner selection.



PLM PARTNER CHECKLIST: WHAT DO USERS WANT?

1. Modern software

Modern software is intuitive. Think of apps you use every day on a tablet or smartphone – the user interface doesn't need in-depth explanation and it's either very simple to use or easily configurable based on your needs. Accomplishing a single task requires a couple of taps.

Different users have different priorities. They need to be able to configure views to see relevant alerts for tasks routed to them and slice and dice reports on the fly to quickly view essential data. Information should be easy to find and flexible in how users choose to display it. The right PLM is a useful tool that supports users to work more efficiently and make smarter decisions faster.

2. Roadmap execution

Every company has a roadmap that documents the direction of their software development. Timelines for integrating and creating new functions and features as well as dates for new version releases are included in this plan. Often these are multi-year roadmaps, and like everything, they are prone to adjustment. It is important to understand how items get into the roadmap? Are there documented use-cases from actual customers?

One basic thing that people don't seem to ever ask is how much of past roadmaps actually made it into a new release, how long development takes and why the roadmap changes? Comparing a past roadmap to actual software is an interesting exercise that allows you to see if a vendor does what they say they will.

Some questions to ask are: Does the PLM roadmap have features that will be useful to the team? Will it actually deliver functionality that makes product development better, easier and faster? Are new features market driven? Have past roadmap plans actually been completed?

3. User-requested features

Being able to adapt to change is critical to innovation which means evolving your processes, stopping some altogether or connecting to new partners and systems as the world evolves around you. This is often enhanced by a new software feature or app that ties into your existing software system.

This works differently at every PLM provider. As you do your due diligence, make sure you speak to their current clients and ask about how their own needs have changed and what they do when they need a new feature in their PLM system to support their business. Find out how these changes have been incorporated into their system and how the process went. Was the PLM partner even open to their request for new features? Did it take a long time or was it really quick?

4. Dedication to your industry and relevant references

Is this PLM vendor committed to serving the needs of your industry? Do they understand the specific market challenges you face? If the answer is yes, they'll have customers that have similar processes or products within an industry, such as retail or sewn products manufacturing, that you can speak with about their experience and the ROI achieved on their PLM investment. Don't be shy-ask for customer references and case studies. Check out new customers they've started working with over the last couple of years and whether their businesses are similar to yours. Better yet, contact customers without asking the PLM vendor to intervene. How happy are current users? What is their customer attrition rate?

If they don't have continual growth in your particular market or proven track record of satisfied customers, are they really likely to allocate resources to developing innovations that cater to it?

5. User training and support

If your chosen PLM solution is modern and intuitive, user training shouldn't be an issue, whether conducted by an internal team or trainer from the PLM vendor. It's important to clarify this process. Who is responsible for training? Are there standard templates that can be used? Will they have to be customized? If users understand what to do in the software and how to do it, they're much more likely to use it. If they can't figure out how to do it with PLM, most people will resort to offline documents to manage their work, negating the entire purpose of investing in a PLM system.

Ask about your prospective PLM partner's technical support capabilities. What happens if it's late night crunch time just before a line review meeting and a designer gets an error message? Will they be able to get help from the technical support team or will they have to wait until the consultant who customized their system has time to troubleshoot in a day or so?

PLM PARTNER CHECKLIST: PRIORITIES FOR IT AND BUSINESS LEADERS

1. Implementation time

Implementation is important to get right and shouldn't be unnecessarily rushed but it should happen in a timely manner with little disruption to your business. If implementation is completed a year after the initial plan was created, your business may be in a different place or have different needs. If what was implemented cannot be easily adjusted or modified, each time a change is needed, its back to the time-consuming drawing board.

Implementation time may also vary based on the hosting model. If a company's own hosting services are used, this may impact implementation time versus using a SaaS model that is cloud-hosted and web enabled giving users global access to data from the start.

2. Implementation cost

PLM providers offer a range of annual maintenance costs and what customers get for this cost can vary widely. Find out what the cost will be and what this covers. For instance, does it include the cost of upgrades and technical support or are these are separately calculated?

In conjunction with the time it takes to implement a system, calculating how much disruption there will be is a factor. Consider whether people will have to work in dual ways, using the new system and spreadsheets simultaneously, until implementation is complete or a previous season's data is fully documented.

3. Market-driven innovations

Some cutting-edge PLM providers have 3-4 new software version releases each year and continue to innovate to keep up with the exponential pace of change that their clients are experiencing. Others release a new version every year or two and may not include many useful new features. Ask your potential PLM vendors when their last software version release was, what features were included and if user feedback was incorporated. This will help you discover if they're really committed to your market.

4. Integration with other systems

Modern business requires multiple software systems to handle different functional areas, such as ERP to manage financials and planning systems to manage production and logistics. Many companies connect them together to push and pull necessary data so that everyone is on the same page and decisions can happen when they need to.

Some PLM companies make this easy and connections can be done in-house by the client's IT team or with minimal software vendor involvement. With other software vendors, integration with other systems requires more costly involvement by experts over a longer time period.

Understanding what software systems need to be connected with PLM and what this entails from a vendor perspective is an essential piece of the PLM partner selection puzzle. Some questions to ask are: how does the PLM connect to other systems? Does the PLM offer Application Programming Interface (Rest API)? What options are there for getting data out of PLM and into another system? Does the PLM include a Software Development Kit (SDK) to create new applications connected to the PLM?



CONCLUSION

When you're examining a potential PLM partner, remember that the total cost of ownership isn't just monetary. Innovative PLM is a tool to enable your employees and co-workers to do their jobs from wherever and whenever they need. By introducing continual and useful innovations, a forward-looking PLM solution will adjust to changes in processes and the industry. Most importantly, a truly innovative PLM vendor drives business growth by keeping up with industry changes so fashion, apparel and consumer goods companies can innovate with their own products, get them to market faster and stay ahead of the competition.

Centric Software is a PLM partner that creates useful, smart and innovative solutions for fashion, apparel, outdoor, consumer goods and retail businesses. We thrive on customer feedback. Regularly working with our Customer Advisory Board, we listen to our customers. Their feedback is the origin of our ongoing innovative feature updates and releases as well as completely new functions and additional innovative solutions made specifically for the fashion, apparel, outdoor, consumer goods and retail industries.

Centric PLM empowers designers and product developers to focus on what's important – the customer – versus monotonous and redundant data entry. As a reflection of modern life, fashion, technology and social expectations continually evolve: your PLM software should do exactly that.



PLM PARTNER CHECKLIST

We've created a handy list of questions you can print or refer to on your mobile device in meetings with potential PLM partners.

PLM partner checklist: what do users want?

Modern PLM software	Is the PLM solution intuitive to use? Is it easy to learn and configure?	
A promising development roadmap	How does this compare with their development roadmap from 1 year ago? What have they accomplished in the past year from the roadmap?	
Users can request new features and functionality	What percentage of requests become part of the PLM solution? Are new features customized? Does this affect upgrades?	
Significant numbers of customers in your industry, growing all the time	Is this software that other companies in the industry are really using? Are current customers happy? Is it one that will continue to make smart R&D investments in the industry?	
Quality user training and support	Is training customized or standard? What about technical support?	

PLM partner checklist: priorities for IT and business leaders

Implementation time	How long have other customers taken to complete their implementations? Did they do everything at once or use a phased approach?	
Implementation and maintenance costs	What was the total cost of software, consultants, training, disruption to the business? What is the maintenance cost annually? What is the cost of upgrading, both monetarily and in terms of user efficiency?	
Market-driven innovation	Do they have at least one major release a year? How many minor releases did they have last year? Were these just to fix bugs or did they include new features? When is the next one scheduled?	
Integration with other systems	How easy is it to integrate the PLM with other business systems or software? Is it a fairly simple API or does it take a few programming consultants to create the links? Is an SDK available to create unique applications?	

ABOUT CENTRIC SOFTWARE

From its headquarters in Silicon Valley and offices in trend capitals around the world, Centric Software provides a Digital Transformation Platform for the most prestigious names in fashion, retail, footwear, luxury, outdoor, and consumer goods. Centric Visual Innovation Platform (VIP) is a visual, fully digital collection of boards for touch-based devices like iPad, iPhone, and large-scale, touch-screen televisions. Centric VIP transforms decision making and automates execution to truly collapse time to market and distance to trend. Centric's flagship product lifecycle management (PLM) platform, Centric 8, delivers enterprise-class merchandise planning, product development, sourcing, business planning, quality, and collection management functionality tailored for fast-moving consumer industries. Centric SMB packages extended PLM, including innovative technology and key industry learnings tailored for small businesses.

Centric Software has received multiple industry awards, including the Frost & Sullivan Product Leadership Award in Retail, Fashion, and Consumer Goods PLM in 2018 and Frost & Sullivan's Global Retail, Fashion, and Apparel PLM Product Differentiation Excellence Award in 2016 and 2012. Red Herring named Centric to its Top 100 Global list in 2013, 2015 and 2016.



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