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Customer Relationship Management at Farm Credit Services of Mid-America: Working towards a SingleView¹

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Abstract

This case study explores Farm Credit Services of Mid-America's (FCS MA) process of identifying and implementing new technology needed to meet the needs of their customer relationship management (CRM) program. This case illustrates the key challenges facing firms as their CRM programs are expanded and improved to continually meet the customer's needs and explores the complexities of developing and implementing a large information technology system. Decisions ranging from which technology system is right to which approach is best when training and motivating the system users are considered.

Keywords: customer relationship management, technology implementation, market segmentation, marketing strategy

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Background

Farm Credit Services of Mid-America (FCS MA) is a cooperative financial services provider serving over 65,000 customers throughout the states of Kentucky, Ohio, Indiana, and Tennessee. Through internal growth, consolidations, and mergers, FCS MA has become the nation's largest Farm Credit association with more than \$8.5 billion in loan assets, 81 lending locations, and over 750 employees.

FCS MA's core strategy is to deliver financial products, loan products, and limited financial services in a competitive, efficient, and seamless fashion to farmers and rural residents. FCS MA believes their customers look for value, so they concentrate on low cost and efficiency. At the same time, FCS MA believes they must create a relationship with their customers that is so proactive, deep, and tangible that the customer will not want to shop with anyone else. Therefore, 'customer focus' is one of FCS MA's six corporate values. FCS MA defines this 'customer focus value' to mean that "FCS MA will constantly seek to identify and understand the needs of both our external and internal customers – and to exceed their expectations in a way that will help them achieve success." According to FCS MA, these corporate values are intended to help define both expectations of employees and practices to be followed.

Delivering on the customer focus defined above is important because FCS MA's customers are diverse. Farm and agribusiness customers range from those that have gross farm incomes (GFI) as low as \$500 annually to large national agribusiness firms with sales in the hundreds of millions of dollars. In addition to farm loans, FCS MA offers home loans to anyone living in rural areas or in towns with a population under 2500. Approximately 85% of their portfolio is in agricultural loans to full and part-time farmers and agribusinesses, and about 15% is in consumer loans.

Farm loans include operating loans, equipment loans, and real estate loans with many rate options and payment types. Country home or consumer loans include loans to build, re-build, purchase, or develop a homestead. Finally, financial services include life insurance, crop insurance, and funds management. Clearly, customers needing these types of loans and financial services are diverse, and FCS MA has grown by serving all of them in their four state region.

Segmenting Customers at FCS MA

Maintaining FCS MA's core value of customer focus is a challenge due to the diverse customer base, the broad product offering, and the large size of the organization. For these reasons, FCS MA's leadership recognized a need to develop a segmented marketing strategy. Four segments, listed below with some of their primary characteristics, were identified by FCS MA leadership:

1. Rural Home or Agri-Consumer (farmer with annual GFI of \$500 to \$40,000)

- Influenced by timeliness of handling of all service requests, trouble free loan processing procedures, and up-front explanations of all services.
- Reached through influencers such as builders, realtors, current customers, auctioneers, insurance agents, title companies, developers, and other lenders.

2. Part-time Farmer (GFI of \$40,000 to \$100,000)

- Influenced by same factors as agri-consumers plus visible community involvement by all FCS MA staff. Expects staff to possess a strong grasp of all eligibility rules and lending regulations.
- Reached through influencers such as equipment dealers and input suppliers.

3. Traditional Farmer (GFI of \$100,000 to \$250,000)

- Influenced by up-front and personal contact. Counseling and agricultural expertise is important. One-on-one farm visits are needed, and loan approvals or denials must be communicated clearly.
- Reached through community involvement and one-on-one attention.

4. Commercial Farmer (GFI of \$250,000 and up)

- Expects lending officers to have broad expertise and a thorough understanding of the agricultural industry and important trends.
- Lending officers must allow customer preferences to drive the type of relationship and level of necessary contact, but at least two annual, personal contacts should be made with each customer in this group.

FCS MA leadership believes that these market segments and associated characteristics are general guidelines, but not absolutes. They recognize that customer relationships are complex and that every customer has some unique characteristics.

Serving Customers at FCS MA

FCS MA's current structure allows for decentralized, site specific execution of the marketing strategy. Home town service is provided from over 80 locations by financial service officers (FSOs). The FSO is the key person in determining the type of relationship that best matches the customer's needs. Some FSOs are dedicated to the consumer market and others serve the agricultural market. The agricultural FSOs have a considerable array of loan products, interest rate options, loan pricing flexibility and financial services to build from as they develop tailored solutions for farmer customers.

In addition to directing the customer relationship, the FSO is responsible for sales, has authority to act on loan requests, and keeps information on potential customers such as loan needs or expansion plans. The approximately 80 agricultural FSOs are encouraged to spend a high percentage of their time doing field visits with their 250 to 400 accounts. (Some FSOs have as many as 900 accounts.) The average loan portfolio for an FSO runs anywhere from \$45 million to \$75 million. At the same time, the realities of the position require a relatively significant amount of time to be invested in completing administrative duties. The FSO also directs the customer service representative (CSR), business analyst (BA), and other FCS MA employees when they participate in the customer relationship.

The CSR interacts with customers on a regular basis doing loan processing and follow-up work, moving money between accounts, and performing other transactional activities. Although CSRs spend most of their time in the office, they have a high degree of customer interaction over the telephone. While customers have primary CSRs, the realities of scheduling mean that at any given time, a farmer customer may be working with a different CSR. The role of the CSR is to support the FSO, and for each FSO there are usually two CSRs. The FSO and the CSR are housed in the same location, but their roles and relationships do vary some from location to location across the four-state area.

The business analysts (BAs) complete the customer service team in a role primarily focused on evaluating loan applications. Although the BAs have little direct contact with the customers, they are encouraged to spend as much as 15% of their time in the field meeting customers. In many cases, such BA contact with customers plays an educational role to help producers better understand the loan decisions FCS MA makes. At other times, it is a trust building activity, so the farmer customer can become more comfortable with the 'lending team' servicing his/her account. In many cases BAs are not at the same physical location as the CSRs and FSOs they support. Figure 1 depicts the relationship between FSOs, CSRs, and BAs.

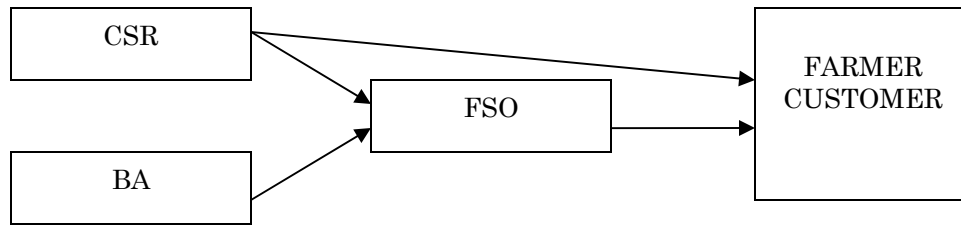


Figure 1: Organizational Relationship between Customers, FSOs, CSRs, and BAs

A recent survey of FSOs revealed much about the nature of their relationships with farmer customers:

- FSOs typically have between 30 and 90 accounts (out of 250 to 400 total accounts) that receive close attention, while 15 to 30 accounts receive concentrated attention.
- These key customers (top 30 to 90 accounts) account for between 40% and 70% of new money opportunities in addition to their current business.
- A list of 10 - 15 “hot prospect” accounts is maintained by most FSOs.
- These “hot prospects” account for 10% to 15% of new money opportunities.
- Most FSOs perform some administrative/clerical tasks that should be delegated to CSRs or clerical staff. A general belief is that FSOs could accomplish much more with more CSR support.

Finally, the FSOs, CSRs, and BAs are all involved in the loan origination process. This process involves manual customer information entry into one of four loan origination software tools that exist at FCS MA. FCS MA leadership acknowledges that the loan origination process is inefficient.

Sales Force Automation

FCS MA’s sales culture involves tracking a variety of performance metrics and emphasizes basic principles of reaching out to customers through sales calls, letter writing, emails, and tailoring loan options, among other sales and marketing tactics. Metrics in these areas are measured weekly, benchmarked, and reported within the organization. Each FSO and CSR knows how their performance compares to others in the organization.

Unfortunately, FCS MA computer systems currently do not allow FSOs to share information on business leads with other FSOs or with management. Also, the effectiveness of managing new money accounts (prospects) is not known or tracked in any meaningful way. While the nature of the financial products they sell requires tremendous amounts of data to be collected for loan applications, customer contact data is not collected in any formal way, and marketing and selling activities are not automated to any significant degree.

FCS MA management first recognized the need for better tracking of customer contact data and automating sales force tasks in the late 1990's when a system called ACT! was implemented. ACT! is a popular stand alone sales contact management software system that tracks customer contact information, assists in management of customer communications, offers calendaring of customer contacts and service tasks, and provides for a variety of summary reports on sales/contact activity. However, ACT! was not designed to be integrated with FCS MA accounting or lending systems. Management decided on a conservative, demand-driven roll-out for ACT!. They made ACT! available to interested FSOs, and assumed that other FSOs would begin using the new system as they realized the software system's value.

ACT! received a lukewarm response within the organization. Because ACT! was not integrated into FCS MA's other information technology systems, senior FSOs did not find the system especially helpful. These superior FSO performers saw little value in taking the time to enter data when 'they were doing a great job already'. And, less experienced FSOs (those who would benefit most from the ACT! system) followed the senior FSO lead and did not use ACT!. Another problem with ACT! initially was that it did not synchronize with the central corporate ACT! database properly, leading to much frustration by those FSOs who did want to use the program.

Management became more proactive and attempted to encourage FSOs to use ACT!. However, given that most of the benefits were local and remained with the FSOs, management was not getting much useful information from the ACT! system either. Therefore, mandating the use of ACT! seemed hardly appropriate (many FSOs were truly doing a good job with their existing systems), and for similar reasons, encouraging the use of ACT! through a reward system appeared self-defeating. Over time, a few FSOs did begin using ACT! and most all who did benefited from it. For example, one FSO ultimately had 1200 contacts in the ACT! system and used ACT! very effectively in improving her relationships with farmer customers.

Even though some FSOs had good experiences with ACT!, management decided that ACT! did not fit the company's needs more broadly. The software created additional work and offered employees little benefit. While FCS MA management had decided to pursue other options, ACT! continued to be used in a variety of

places around the organization. In the end, most FCS-MA employees found ACT! an inconvenience which quickly went away. But the failed attempt did set a negative precedent for future software implementations within the decentralized FCS-MA organization.

Despite the problems with the ACT! implementation, FCS MA needed some type of information system to support their desired customer relationships. The internal communication processes at FCS MA were just too inefficient to meet the goals of their CRM program. The current systems and processes did not capture business intelligence, redundancies were normal, and communication gaps resulted in mistakes and embarrassments in front of the customers. Figure 2 shows the complex maze of technology and communication links that FCS MA employees must work through.

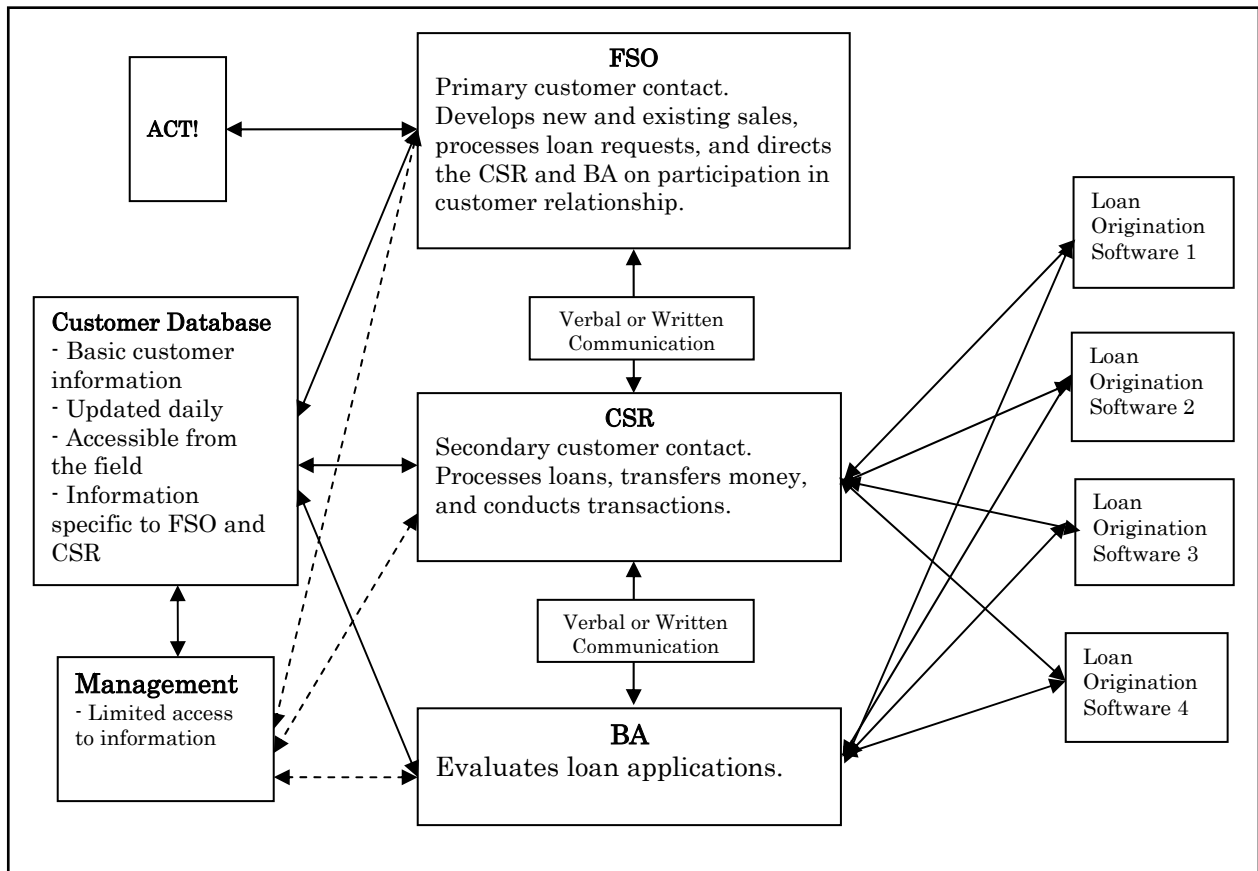


Figure 2: Internal Communication Using the Current Processes and Technology

Working toward a SingleView

Building off their market segmentation and field sales strategy, FCS MA began moving toward a more formal CRM strategy in 2002. The organization was already

pursuing targeted marketing strategies aimed at specific customer segments. The FSOs were already working toward developing tailored solutions for commercial agricultural accounts. But, working with a diverse set of customers and managing the myriad of organizational touches with accounts was a real challenge. And, ACT! just did not meet the firm's needs. In addition, the organization was growing quickly, and providing systems to accommodate significant numbers of new FSOs, CSRs, and BAs was a reality (more than 100 new hires in these areas were expected over the next few years). After the ACT! experience and recognizing the demands growth would create, the need for an integrated software system was even more obvious.

From early on, the most senior levels of management were involved in discussions and decisions about the overall initiative. FCS MA management believed that implementing a successful CRM program of this size and scope would require improved technology systems to track, communicate between, and integrate all aspects of the FCS MA organization. FCS MA's information systems more broadly needed an overhaul. And, the decision was made to pursue CRM capabilities as part of a larger systems redesign. As the discussions progressed, the huge financial and time commitments of such a system soon became obvious.

Early in the process, FCS MA looked outside to get an external perspective on their requirements and systems which would deliver to those requirements. A consulting firm was chosen based on experience with peer-type applications to provide this external perspective. While their early recommendations were more extensive than FCS MA viewed desirable, the consultant brought considerable value to the overall project in terms of systems definition and scope. This consulting project, building on extensive FCS MA input, surfaced the following business needs for a new software system:

- Centralize the business onto one technology system. This includes accounting, lending, and business development.
- Be accessible and usable by all 750 FCS MA employees. Employees must need to, and want to, use this system – real benefits must exist. Over 200 FSOs and 350 CSRs will use the software.
- Capture and possess intelligence. A single source must exist for looking up, managing, and serving customers. This will reduce processing time and errors.
- Reduce redundant work. The current system requires duplicate entry and is not integrated. The new system must allow for single entry and visibility by all.

- Gain information on prospective customers and the lending market. Seventy percent of new money opportunities come from loan officer/customer relationships, but little or no 'new opportunity' data is stored within the organization. The new system must help track and identify potential new business. The new system must help FCS MA management better understand the lending market.
- Increase service without disruptions. The current customers should receive better service in the form of reduced processing time. Loan officers will better serve current customers by having quick access to all account information.

FCS MA began developing an in-house system specially designed to meet their needs, but in-house development was abandoned when new semi-custom CRM software systems became available. In the end, FCS MA opted for a custom database shell which utilized commercially available modules to meet the dual demands of customization and cost efficiency. They called the new system SingleView because ultimately, FCS MA wants a 'single view' of their customers available throughout the organization. This semi-custom system is designed to organize and manage information critical to running and expanding the business by integrating accounting, loan management, and business development activities.

For the CRM strategy to be successful, this new technology must be successful. One aspect of the SingleView system is Microsoft CRM (MS-CRM), the commercially available module that FCS MA selected for managing data on customers and potential customers. MS-CRM will help create an organized data base of all customers, leads, and contacts. The CRM system will log all customer contact while giving the entire organization access to important customer information. The capabilities of MS-CRM will help FSOs, CSRs, BAs, and management both better communicate and better serve customers.

The MS-CRM component of the SingleView system will allow FCS MA to generate business intelligence through quick and easy customer information entry. This information will, in turn, allow for much easier reporting and information sharing. The MS-CRM and the larger SingleView system will be used by the entire FCS MA organization. Decentralized data entry will allow everyone from the CSRs to management to look at account activity in real time. All employees will have a single management and customer contact tool. Sales metric tracking and reporting will be a part of the early capabilities of the system. The commercial farmer CRM segment will see fewer "fumbles", and large accounts with multiple entities will be easier to manage. Finally, small loan applications will be approved faster. Figure 3 shows the simplified internal communication flow between employees and databases.

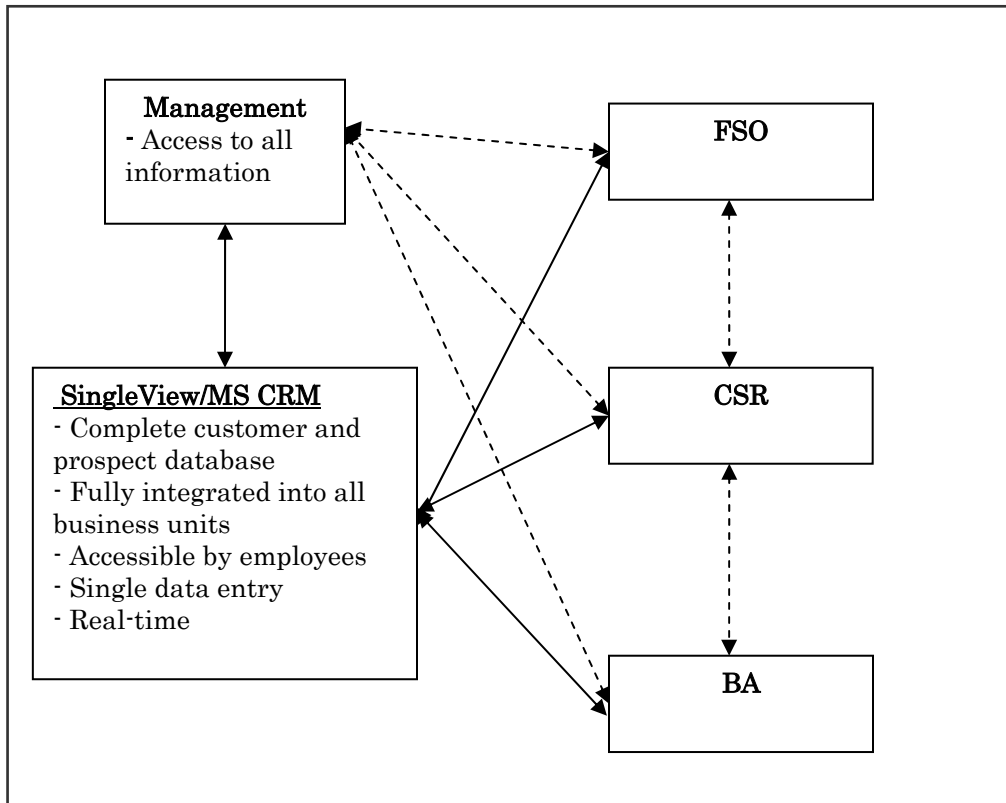


Figure 3: Internal Communication Using the New SingleView System

Eventually, SingleView will hold all customer information on a company intranet system (data warehouse). From customers seeking home loans to commercial farmers, all customers should realize faster processing time and more precise service because SingleView will ultimately connect to loan application process and loan approval software, which is currently handled by four separate software systems. This new system will offer the potential to support the development of a call center longer term.

Many individuals inside and outside the organization were involved in the development of the system. Externally, extensive discussions were held with AgriBank, the wholesale lender and provider of business services for FCS MA. Internally, a cross-functional team of 25 FCS MA employees was assembled to discuss and surface functionality issues for the project. The role and organization of this team evolved over time, but the group (and subsequent sub-groups) provided crucial insights into the overall project. The initial rollout was scheduled for fall of 2004 but was subsequently pushed back to July 2005. A beta test project was begun in May 2005 at four offices, one in each of the four states served by FCS MA. These four sites were primarily charged with final testing and fine-tuning of the near ready-to-launch system. Once the system is rolled out, FCS MA management fully

expect utilization of system functionalities to pick up speed as users become more comfortable with the system and the 'wins' become more evident.

The vision for FCS MAs CRM program and SingleView is clear. SingleView will centralize the business onto one technology system, be accessible and usable by all 750 FCS MA employees, capture and possess customer intelligence, reduce redundant work, help gain information on prospective customers and the lending market, and increase service without disruptions. FCS MA will use the new technology to better serve their customer segments while focusing on cost and efficiency.

Implementation – People, Process, Technology

FCS MA management knows that integrating the SingleView and MS-CRM system into the daily operations of the FSOs and CRMs will be challenging. The beta test confirmed that the technology is ready for the "go live date". New work processes are in place to ensure that SingleView will allow for all key "business essential" functions. Finally, but most importantly, FSOs and CSRs are being trained and prepared to embrace the technology under all circumstances. Unlike ACT!, SingleView must be used to its full potential, by everyone in the organization, to execute the organization's CRM strategy.

Creating a culture where the FSOs and CSRs embrace SingleView has been a priority of management from the beginning. FCS MA management realizes that FSOs and CSRs are motivated differently. For example, FSOs are motivated to identify potential customers and sell loans. Therefore, highlighting the capabilities of identifying new customers and new loan opportunities is a top priority for "selling" SingleView to the FSOs. CSRs want to quickly process loans and look up/access information when necessary. Therefore, highlighting the software's functionality is a top priority for "selling" the system to the CSRs.

Three major SingleView "wins" have been shared with company employees. First, the integration of MS-CRM and MS Outlook has been seamless, meaning that users will have access to all MS-CRM functions simply by opening MS Outlook. (MS Outlook was already in use throughout the organization as an e-mail system and scheduling tool.) This systems integration should appeal to the CSRs. Next, SingleView was utilized to sort through a purchased FSA database of 49,000 full-time farmer, non-customer prospects, to identify high-priority prospects. The marketing/sales campaign based on these data resulted in \$65 million of new business for FCS MA. This win highlighted how FSOs can use SingleView to develop new business. Finally, SingleView was used for a loan conversion look-up exercise, saving customers literally millions of dollars and increasing FCS MA's profit when loans were renegotiated to take advantage of new, lower interest rates.

Using SingleView to its fullest potential requires each user to be comfortable with the system. Therefore, management has pro-actively developed a four-phase training approach. The first phase is a conference that sets the direction for SingleView. The new tools and their potential are explained, and each FSO and CSR is given an hour of hands-on training. The second phase makes use of computer based training modules, which management believes have been quite successful. Webinars, in which experts answer questions, make up the third phase. The fourth and final phase is regional meeting roll-outs, supported by each individual FCS MA office. At this point, training phases one and two are complete.

Management knows that even with their proactive approach, several issues may negatively influence FSO and CSR attitudes toward, and use of, the new technology. First, while FCS MA's systems and technology group has grown from 15 employees to 27 employees, it has been strained by the massive workload of the roll-out. Systems requirements and problems with speed ultimately required upgrades to servers, and the original "go live date" was pushed back by several months. Next, systems restrictions will make the SingleView system virtually unavailable when FSOs are out of the office in the field, and dial-up use may be limited or slow. Therefore, maintenance of the estimated 250,000 database entries could become a tedious end-of-day or end-of week project, instead of a real-time management exercise. Furthermore, competition between FSOs may reduce the incentive to keep all information updated, because of fear that a customer will be 'stolen' or persuaded to change to a different FSO. Most importantly, the corporate culture at FCS MA is nurturing and decentralized, so, if FSOs and CSRs do not embrace the new technology, forced use and mandates might create resentment and more adoption problems.

Possible approaches to ensure that SingleView and MS-CRM are integrated into the daily activities of the FSOs and CSRs include a plan to have FSOs and CSRs isolate and work on key skills, which require the use of SingleView. Alternatively, upper level management could rely on SingleView for reports that are now compiled verbally through weekly meetings, meaning that only results from FSOs and CSRs using the software would be recognized. Whatever the solution might be, the FSOs and CSRs must embrace the use of SingleView and MS-CRM to fully execute the organization's CRM strategy.

A Perspective from the Users in the Field

An FSO and a CSR involved in the SingleView pilot program shared their views on SingleView. They have 'heard' the proposed benefits of SingleView communicated in the training sessions. However, they have some concerns. Reduced data access and lost speed, security issues, and start-up and training issues are on their minds. The reduced data access and lost speed concern tops their list. With SingleView, an FSO cannot lookup loan information at a customer's location, which is a capability of the

current system. Furthermore, the new system response speed is slower for the CSR, so calls from customers or FSOs in the field cannot be answered instantaneously, as they were before SingleView. (The data are, of course, more current with SingleView.)

The users are also concerned about internal security issues. As proposed, every FSO and CSR will have access to every customer's account and every prospect's information. The users question whether all FSOs and CSRs should be able to see every borrower's information. Second, any employee could potentially leave the company with FCS MA's entire customer database, including potential customer lists. The users final concern relates to numerous start-up issues and what they perceive as a general lack of communication and training. The start-up issues range from error messages to reporting problems, and the training to date was described as an overview, not in-depth or sufficient.

Even though the concerns and emotion are real, the users do articulate some of the benefits they expect to come from SingleView. Moving to a paperless world will mean fewer 'sticky notes', few redundancies, fewer errors, and faster information sharing. Future capabilities, such as a company wide loan origination system, are also recognized as possible with a new system. Still, the users keep wondering how they will ever fully realize benefits from SingleView, and how chaotic their life will be until they do.

Discussion Questions

1. Clearly, FCS MA put in place many of the elements of a CRM strategy before pursuing the technology dimensions of CRM aggressively. What are some of the strengths of their CRM approach to date? What areas could use improvement?
2. Based on what you know about FCS MA, their CRM strategy, their experience with ACT!, and their implementation experience to date, what are the most important benefits you see to this investment – from the customer, firm, and the FSO/CSR perspective?
3. The users interviewed clearly have some concerns about the implementation and use of SingleView. Are their concerns justified? In your opinion, are they unusual or to be expected? More broadly, what challenges from FSOs/CSRs do you expect during the roll-out?
4. Compare and contrast what you know about the ACT! experience with what you know about the SingleView experience. How are the technologies similar or different? How is management's approach to the implementation and the need for the system similar or different?

5. Use what you know about FCS MA, their CRM program, and their technology implementation to date to develop a roll-out plan for the new SingleView system. At this point, what should be done to make sure the new technology is used to help meet the goals of FCS MAs CRM program?

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