Contact Sage Pro Review on Morningstar.com

Among Midlevel CRM Peers, Contact Sage Pro Stands Out

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Like Junxure-I, Contact Sage Pro is an industry-specific customer-relationship-management program that is designed to suit the unique needs of financial-service professionals.

Offered by B & I Computer Consultants,Contact Sage Pro includes detailed data fields (risk profile and investment goals), the ability to enter information about family members, and the ability to track insurance policies.

Unlike most industry-specific programs, which tend to be much more expensive than general-purpose CRM programs, Contact Sage Pro is a bargain. A single-user license costs just $295*, with an annual support charge of just $100. A PDA module is available for a one-time charge of just $95. Reasonably priced Palm and Pocket PC versions are available, as are networked installations.

In addition, the company offers Contact Sage, which does not include the investment or insurance modules. Those who record such information elsewhere can purchase this version for just $195, including the PDA module. Support will still run you $100 per year.

With prices like these for an industry-specific program, both programs are the price leaders in their category, but are they any good? That's what we decided to find out.

Contact Sage Pro--An Overview

Contact Sage Pro is a Microsoft Access-based program, but according to company spokesman Bill Jacobs, the program does not require the user to have Access. Contact Sage Pro will run as long as Access runtime (available for free at the company's Web site) is installed. By electing to use runtime instead of the full version of Access, users only lose the ability to customize screens, because those controls reside within Access. As a practical matter, very few users customize screens, according to Jacobs, so for the vast majority of advisors, there's no reason to get Access if they do not already have it.

As you can see in our screen shots, the customizable main user screen (please click here for screen shot) contains the type of data a typical financial-service professional might want at his or her fingertips. The primary contact information is all here, as are occupation, risk tolerance, investment goals, income, net worth, last contact, next scheduled contact, preferred method of contact, and call frequency.

Insurance-policy information is displayed on the lower right, but pressing the Investment button will toggle to the investment screen instead. Only one investment will be displayed in the area at a time, but it is easy to scroll through the individual holdings. As an alternative, one can click the Investment icon at the top right of the screen, and a list of all investments will be displayed.

Almost any function a user might want to perform can be initiated from the contact screen, be it viewing notes, looking at the client history, scheduling appointments, assigning priorities, viewing holdings or insurance, sending e-mail or form letters, or filtering for contacts that meet a criteria.

The contact screen has some less obvious features that are worth noting. For example, the More button, located to the upper right of the screen under the investment icon, enables the user to create 20 additional user-defined fields (please click here for screen shot). As illustrated in the lower left, users can add text fields (orange), date fields (yellow), number fields (blue), or check box fields (green).

Another less obvious feature on the main contact page is the Link button, located under the More button. The Link button enables advisors to group a number of contact records together. Advisors might use it when they want to record detailed information about a number of family members. The main contact screen has a Family icon at the top. Pressing this button allows advisors to enter the name, relationship, and birth date of a contact's family member. It also provides room for a comment, but not much more. If advisors want to track more complete information about a family member, they can duplicate the current client record, make changes as necessary, and link the newly created family member record to the original client record.

Contacts can be grouped together for other purposes as well. For example, an advisor might group together contacts with a common interest, such as international equities, and send them relevant e-mail.

The Good

Contact Sage Pro has a flexible set-up. Administrators can easily customize settings for each individual user with the set-up screen. For example, if the Password Protect System box is checked (please click here for screen shot), different levels of access can be granted to each user. Someone granted system password permission can perform all functions, including accessing, adding, changing, deleting, and altering system settings. At the other end of the spectrum, those with access password permission can only view the database; they cannot make any changes.

Another plus is that if the Remind Upcoming Appts box is checked, an appointment reminder pop-up will appear before scheduled appointments. In this case, the program is set to scan for appointments and one minute intervals, and remind the user 10 minutes before a scheduled appointment.

System message settings control the display of comment messages, confirmation messages (Are you sure you want to do this?), and error messages. The back-up option is a nice touch. It will automatically prompt the user to back up on a daily or weekly basis when enabled.

The auto appointment feature makes sure that client contact is maintained on a regular basis. The user can set the contact frequency for each client individually at the client contact screen, and the feature can be disabled on the individual contact level if necessary.
Users can select various types of information that they would like to appear on the main contact screen by checking the appropriate boxes on the lower right. If they intend to synchronize with a PDA, Synch Set-Up must be enabled.

I also like the fact that the installation files are relatively small. The regular version is about a 5 MB download and the Pro version is about 5.75 MB. This means that it is probably practical for even those using a dial-up connection to download the program instead of ordering disks in the mail. Potential purchasers can download a full working version and try it for 30 days without charge.

I also like that users can generally back up their data to a disk*, so they are more likely to back up regularly, and store copies in multiple locations.

Since the program relies on an Access database, changing programs at a later date should not be challenging. Furthermore, if for some reason the company stopped supporting the system, someone else could probably step in and maintain it.

Commission-based advisors will enjoy the ability to track commissions, as well as the flexibility to create customizable commission reports. Insurance agents are sure to find the customizable premium reports to their liking.

Mike Katz, of Planhere, in Alexandria, Va., switched to Contact Sage Pro from Broker's Ally about 2 ½ years ago, and he is pleased with his decision. Mike often does mail merges and sends e-mail from within the Contact Sage Pro. He says the program helps him make sure that he follows up with each contact in a timely fashion.

Although the program isn't designed specifically for company-wide work-flow management, Mike says he can control work-flows between himself and his assistant using it. When he wants her to complete client tasks, he simply makes entries into the contact record, prioritizes if necessary, and makes his assistant the "owner" of that record. After the assistant has completed her tasks, the record is assigned back to Mike. At any time, Mike or his assistant can create pending business reports and or appointment lists, to keep track of everything that is going on.

The Bad

Although the program download is small, the tutorial, which all new users can benefit from, is not. At 64 MB, it is too large for someone connecting over a dial-up line to download comfortably. Users who require the runtime version of MS Access will also face a hefty download.

Right now, the investment module will be of limited use to most readers. Manual data entry is required, so unless all of your client investments are limited to a narrow range of products, it is unlikely that you will be inclined to go through the trouble of constantly entering this information. Furthermore, once you enter the data, you will be required to update prices manually as well, although an interface for DST FANMail, due for release late this month, should alleviate the manual update burden for some.

Sales and service template would be a nice addition. Right now, users get a blank template, and they must fill in all of the text. While I understand that each firm has its own individual needs, most users find it easier too modify existing letters rather than start from scratch.

E-mailing form letters from within the client contact screen works well, but it is more complicated than it has to be. Users must first select a subject from a drop-down list, and then select the body of the e-mail from another drop down list. These two steps could easily have been combined into a single step.

The green boxes on the contact screen sometimes contain useful information, but at the risk of sounding older than I am, the small italicized print is difficult to read. I'd like to see the default settings changed for those fonts.

The Uncertain

There are a number of other aspects of the program that could be viewed as either good or bad, depending upon your point of view.

One is the program's overall design and conventions. The creators of the program made a deliberate decision not to follow the usual Microsoft Windows conventions. Adopting a custom system provides some advantages, including mouse-less operation and the numerous keystroke shortcuts. This may actually be an advantage for inexperienced computer users, because learning the basics is not too difficult, and they won't have to retrain themselves from old conventions to new ones; however, for those used to and comfortable with Windows conventions, the unique design can be an annoyance.

Under Contact Sage Pro's system, there are none of the usual drop-down menus, and, for the most part, users follow a linear progression when performing a task. As a result of this design, there are not many opportunities to multitask. For example, generally speaking, when moving from one screen to another, if you want to add some information, you fist must click an Add button, then enter information. When leaving a screen that you have just entered data into, you often must hit Close.

The reason the programmers designed the program this way was to protect the integrity of the database and the indexes. Based on user feedback, the programmers are convinced that the pluses of this approach outweigh the minuses. I don't have a strong opinion on this one way or the other, except to say that those familiar with Microsoft Office, or ACT! for that matter, will require an adjustment period.

Another issue that I'm sort of neutral on is the Help screen: there isn't one. Again, this was a conscious design decision. The idea was to minimize the size of the program file for easy and compact downloads, so instead of providing help files, the Help button takes you to a page on the web containing the online manual. This design works fine if you are connected to the Web, but if you are on the road, you might be less than thrilled with the help set-up. On a stand-alone install, the program copies a manual and users guide to the hard drive, but it is easy to overlook, and I suspect novices will have trouble locating it in any case.

In a Nutshell

This program does not approach the comprehensiveness of Junxure-I and ProTracker, our two preferred industry-specific choices, but then again, comparing Contact Sage Pro to these two really isn't fair. Contact Sage Pro costs a fraction of the price, and it is really targeted at the users of some midlevel, industry-specific programs we haven't looked at recently, such as Broker's Ally, E-Z Data, and Advisor's Assistant.

Based on a cursory look at the feature sets of competing programs, Contact Sage Pro appears to offer much of the functionality the more expensive, midlevel programs possess at a substantially lower price.

For the time being, the one missing link is the investment module. Those who want to track client investments from within their CRM package (or link to another one) will be better served by another system, unless their needs are extremely modest. For everyone else, Contact Sage and Contact Sage Pro offer a lot of performance at a very modest price. Contact Sage Pro may not be the best program on the market today, but it is certainly is a good one; and at current prices, it represents an outstanding value.

Have a technical or software question? E-mail your questions, comments, and suggestions to Joel. He answers them every month in Advisor Tech Q&A.

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*The original article stated the cost as $295 per year which is incorrect.
*The original article stated floppy disk, unfortunately the system will no longer fit onto a floppy disk, but it will easily fit on a USB keychain and is still about 2MB when backed up.