Selecting Retail Systems for the Hospice Sector

Top Tips for success

As technology moves from an option to a necessity in commercial life, many hospices are becoming aware that they are missing the opportunity to significantly increase their revenue by automating critical processes such as Gift Aid. To address this lack, they are looking to install retail software systems, but are often unsure how to proceed. These 'top tips' are the result of decades of experience in supplying retail systems, and of indepth expertise of working with hospice clients in the frontline of the charity sector.

1 As in many areas of life, there is nothing to beat self-knowledge. For any retailer, the first step of a successful systems purchase is to put the business under a spotlight and decide dispassionately what's working and what isn't, what's selling and what isn't. Then look at where you want to be tomorrow. In the hospice retailing sector, you have additional complexities in terms of product supply and you need to make decisions about the classes of goods you want to sell, both donated and new. Evaluate any systems purchase against the strategies and goals you have already set for the business and ask yourself whether technology can help you to achieve them profitably.

2 Consider your people, your volunteers, without whom you would have no business. Their buy-in will make the difference between success and failure so you need to involve them in the project and educate them in the role technology plays in generating increased revenue. Then look at your current level of inhouse expertise. What kind of help would you need to run this system successfully? Don't underestimate the ability of your volunteers to learn new skills, but make sure you cater for all ages and abilities. Make sensible decisions about usability, for example by selecting a touchscreen-based system with large, clear buttons.

3 Evaluate your business against your competition. Look at the best, and aim to emulate or outperform them. If they are not operating a Gift Aid scheme for monetary donations and donated goods, then you can steal a march on them. By clearly publicising this, you will attract more customers and donors to your retail outlets.

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4 What makes the difference between a good system and a great system is invariably the rapport between client and supplier. The calibre of training, support and customisation you might need comes down to the level of expertise, sector experience and empathy that your supplier can bring to bear. Don't be tempted to buy a mainstream EPoS system that a supplier is trying to shoe-horn into the charity sector. Select a system that has been developed with hospices in mind and make sure it is flexible enough to meet your individual requirements. The needs of a single-shop hospice may differ from those of a national charity with hundreds of retail outlets, so your chosen system should reflect this.

5 The most valuable, cash-generative element of any retail system should be its Gift Aid functions. Mainstream charities are exploiting this, but it's a little newer in the hospice field. If you invest in a solution that includes Gift Aid, you can expect an instant uplift and will be able to demonstrate return on investment. Our research shows that hospices can hope to have 23% of donors sign up to Gift Aid in the first year. This gives you an uplift of 28% of the donated revenue. Year on year, the sign-up rate will grow by approximately 10%. Gift Aid can be applied to monetary donations and, thanks to smart technology, to donated goods from those donors who have signed up.

6 If you run both store-based operations and a web site, perhaps even mail order as well, you will achieve radically better results if you opt for an integrated solution. This will give you a single system that incorporates all your channels, and provides all the front-of-shop and back-office functions such as accounts, stock and donor management. Any reporting will be across your entire business, and you will be able to fine-tune your stock-holding, including the purchase and supply of new goods.

7 Ensure that your solution has performance management tools that will give you reports and management intelligence. This will give you a real-time view at any time and from anywhere of how the entire retail operation is working. For possibly the first time, you will have evidence of what is selling where and when. This will help you to make changes and test their effectiveness. Equipped with the right system, you will be able to plan for seasonality and the sale of specialist goods, plus better manage trading patterns and staff working. Simply by knowing your business that much better, you will be able to make smarter decisions, be more analytical and proactive.

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8 It's easy to misjudge how long it takes to implement a system. Whilst you should allow a minimum of 3 months between your order and being fully operational, there is no right or wrong to this. A system can be implemented in a month or it can take 12 months. It all comes down to how much time and energy you put into the process. You know your trading patterns, your quiet times and your peak times, so choose a time that is right for you. Planning and research may have to take place in a busy period, but try to you do your implementation and training at a quiet time.

9 To guarantee a successful implementation and rollout, you will need to rely upon the project management skills of your supplier. Make sure they have a track record of keeping to timescales and can manage all phases of implementation. Look with them at any bespoke system work that might be needed and review your infrastructure. You may find it beneficial to opt for a managed service, where your supplier will host and support the system. This obviates the need for inhouse servers and expertise, and invariably reduces cost and increases reliability. Once rollout has taken place and you have adapted to the system, review its performance as soon as you can. Learn from it and make changes from the intelligence that it generates.

10 Even before the system starts to be installed, you can programme in training. Clients, big and small, are happy to spend money on hardware and software but often cut corners on training. It's just not a saving worth making. Training at the outset and on an ongoing basis can contribute significantly to the success of your new system and to the business uplift you can expect from it. You need to accept that there will be some disruption to normal trading. Schedule time for staff training sensibly (especially as you may be asking for yet more volunteer time). Do your training well and you will gain buy-in and a great foundation to build upon.

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11 Finally, don't underestimate the benefit that a good retail system can have in enabling you to attract and retain good-quality staff and volunteers. People want to work in an environment that is modern and well-managed, where smart objectives can be set and demonstrably met. By being able to analyse your sales performance, you will be able to make intelligent decisions that both boost your revenue but also ensure you use your staff fairly and intelligently.

12 Armed with the right system, you will be able to employ and profit from all the best techniques of mainstream retail within the hospice sector. Good luck!

Call our Charity Team on **0800 030 4437**

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