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Speak to your shortlisted suppliers



Confirm which product can meet your needs, confirm the details you found in your research and get a feel for the kind of supplier you want to work with.



Are they communicating clearly?

If they can't use straightforward language to explain how their product will meet your needs they're probably not worth bothering with. Jargon means someone is hiding something or they're not sure about the detail of how something works. Either way, steer clear.



Are they all smoke and mirrors?

Every time the salesperson tells you about some new bell or whistle that their product has, ask yourself if it's actually something you need. Otherwise you might end up paying for lots of gizmos that bring you no value.



Tell them everything

Give enough information to help them make a good proposal. Talk them through your list of requirements and don't skimp on the details. How well they listen or absorb your specific needs is a good indicator of the kind of relationship you can expect post-purchase.



Does it sound too perfect?

No tool is ever perfect, there's always a bit of compromise involved, so beware of salespeople who make it sound too easy. You're looking for a mature conversation where they take you through what their system can do for you, what it can't, and where there might be ways of adapting it to serve your purposes.



Are they talking about business needs?

The right supplier will understand your business both on a strategic and a process level. They will appreciate your priorities and have a good level of understanding of how your business or your industry works.



Is the software still in development?

If a salesperson says that a feature is in development/will be added soon, alarm bells should be ringing. Software companies, particularly those with less well-established products, are always touting new features. There is no guarantee they will be available soon, or ever.



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Get quotes and zoom in on pricing models



Once you've found suppliers you think you can work with, get a detailed proposal from each of them, even if you're buying off the shelf. Pricing structures are often deliberately confusing so take special care to understand what you're paying for.

Fee per user:

A licence fee per user is probably the most common model, you may also see other structures such as 'per server' or 'per web application' for certain kinds of software.

Licences:

You generally buy a certain number of licences to cover your needs. The cost of each licence may go down the more of them you buy, but make sure you don't pay for licences you don't need.

Subscriptions:

Most software is now sold on a subscription basis, or Software as a Service (SaaS) where you buy a monthly or annual licence. Paying close attention to the pricing of these subscriptions is crucial as they will be your ongoing costs.

Annual or monthly:

Annual subscriptions often work out cheaper, but don't tie yourself into a year-long contract if you're only trying the software out for size.

Lock-in:

Are there any switching costs or charges if you change your mind. Do you have an initial grace period where you can easily get out of your agreement?

Package deals:

Discounted bundles of licences encourage you to buy at the top end of what you need. They might also include support packages and extra features. Make sure you read the fine print and only pay for what you really need.

Basic vs premium:

Basic versions obviously have fewer features or options for customisation, but premium versions can be pricey. If you go for a more advanced model make sure you're getting all the benefits.

"Most popular":

Software vendors often highlight some deals as 'recommended' or 'most popular'. Don't let this lead you astray, these are often just the versions that make the supplier the most margin.

Introductory offers:

A discount on the first few months can be appealing but you might end up using this software for several years so consider the full lifetime costs before you jump in. When you roll off your low rate, the costs can mount up.

Support and maintenance:

Licences may include standard support so make sure this meets your needs. It can be frustrating if you need support outside office hours and then discover that this isn't included. Ask about response time and availability guarantees.

What else is included?

Find out if you'll get any of these things: installation/configuration; integration with other software or systems; a warranty; upgrades; documentation; user workshops or training materials; testing?

3 Trial product



Once you've identified a preferred product and supplier, you should trial the product or at least see a demo. It's very difficult to get a real impression of what a system will be like within your organisation before you use it. It's not always possible, but do it if you can.



Trial the right product:

We spoke to a number of SMEs who had been speaking to a provider about buying the 'basic' version of a piece of software, but were given a free trial of the 'premium' version with functionality that would not be available to them.



Dummy data:

Ideally you want to test the system in a way that mimics as closely as possible how it would really be used possible. Try using it with some dummy data which closely resembles your company's real information. Involve those staff who will use be using the software post-purchase in the testing.

Short-term licence:

Some providers will offer a free trial as standard. For those that don't, see if you can buy a single short-term licence so you can at least give the system a go at minimal cost. Watch out for auto-renewals and cancellation fees attached to a short-term licence.

You're in Step 4 of the SME Guide to Choosing Software. For more templates and guidance please go to bethethebusiness.tools

1. Setting your objective

2. Justifying your budget

3. Creating your shopping list

4. Buying with confidence

5. Making it work for the team

6. Getting your money's worth