Title:
How To Choose The Right Small Business Billing Software

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Summary:
Easy-to-follow 11 step checklist for choosing billing software for your small business.

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Article Body:
If you own or manage a small business, you know how much time can be spent chasing down paper invoices, purchase orders and sales reports. It can be a real nightmare! That is where billing software comes in. It allows you to record all your customers, sales, invoices, inventory, suppliers (and more) in a PC-based system that is easy to use.

Deciding that you need to invest in good quality billing software is not hard. The tricky part can be choosing the right software package for your requirements. There are dozens of systems on the market claiming to be the holy grail of all your business problems, but choosing the wrong one can cost you valuable time and money.

Here's a simple checklist of 11 things to look for when purchasing billing software for your small business:

1) Customer records
This is the core element of any billing system. What sort of information do you need to record about your customers? There's the obvious things like address, phone, fax, mobile, email and web address. But what about marketing-related information like "how did the customer find out about your business?", and "standard discounts" for key clients.

2) Multiple contacts & Communication history
If many of your clients are businesses with multiple contacts, can you record individual contact details for each person? Word of mouth is the most powerful

form of advertising, and statistics show that one of the most important factors in customer satisfaction is good customer service. Have you thought about keeping a log of all communication with your customers? It can be extremely helpful for improving internal communication within your business, and results in a more personalised service for your clients.

3) Multiple shipments
Obviously your billing software will need to create sales orders - that's a gimme. But do you need to record employee-related information, like who the "salesperson" was? What about flexible dispatch options, like multiple shipments per sales order?

4) Search facility
There's no point recording all this really useful information if there's no easy way to get to it. Check that the search facility is flexible and easy to use. What criteria can you search by? Here are a couple useful fields you may want to use: customer phone number, customer address, order date, dispatch date and dispatch consignment number.

5) Tax & regional support
Are you able to change the tax rates on an order line basis? What about currency formatting? If you and your clients are in Europe, then there's no point using billing software that can only handle US dollars.

6) Reporting
Producing accurate reports in seconds is something you no longer have to dream about. In fact it is a necessity in today's competitive market. Ensure your billing software can calculate information on sales based on date, salesperson and customer type. If you operate a B2B business, another key performance indicator may be dispatch totals, based on date, and employee. But one important thing to remember about software... you can only get out what you put in. So if you are looking for a specific report, make sure that information is being recorded by your billing software package.

7) Backup
I've seen first-hand how devastating a hardware failure can be. Hundreds of thousands of dollars worth of data can be destroyed in seconds... if you do not have a backup procedure in place. Ensure you select a billing software package that has a built-in backup utility or works with your current backup system.

8) Online help & support
If you're a new computer user, then you'll definitely need a software package that has a comprehensive online and easy-to-use help system. Also check out what

direct technical support is available through the vendor. Some software companies charge very high fees for personal support, so ensure you include this in your budget.

9) Budget
How much are you going to spend? That really depends on the complexity of the software package you are looking for. Smaller software packages can be found under US$100, and larger more complex packages can cost well over US$3000. Take a look at the number of customers you have, the number of sales orders you process, and choose a solution that fits your business.

10) Customisations
If you purchase an off-the-shelf billing software package, you may require minor customisations to suit your unique business processes and industry. Some software vendors offer customisations at quite reasonable prices. But ensure you include this cost in your budget.

11) Other features
What else do you want from you billing software? If you deal with fixed price products, you may need a comprehensive inventory management system allowing you to purchase stock, manage inventory levels and supplier relations. Some quality software packages also include a useful follow-up diary, allowing you to keep track of tasks and assign them to other staff members.

When choosing a billing software package for your business, make sure you check that it offers everything your business needs. And then the only thing you'll have to worry about is what to do with all your newly found spare time!