

If customer relationship management is about the systems and processes that companies use to market to their customers, vendor relationship management (VRM) is about systems and processes that allow customers to manage their interactions with companies. I'll give an overview of the VRM landscape, what it enables in terms of control over our personal information and new types of interactions, and why I think information professionals, especially those of us who do taxonomy, ontology, and metadata design, must be at the forefront of this movement.

Broadcasting Intent  
Targeted Consuming

Why I think information professionals should be all over this

**Challenges and Opportunities**

- Societal/user behavior: Better, more current, more correct data for vendors
- Legal
- Corporate perceptions
- Willingness to manage info
- Some new ways of inferring metadata need to be developed.

# VRM and Information Management

**Intro**

I'm not an expert, just someone who's been interested in and following this movement for years. I'll be as accurate as possible, but a lot of this is my interpretation; I encourage you to explore the space on your own to find out more.

**What it is**

Brainchild of Doc Searls, co-author of The Cluetrain Manifesto, author of The Intention Economy, and fellow at Harvard's Berkman Center for Internet and Society

From the VRM website: VRM stands for **Vendor Relationship Management**. VRM tools provide customers with both *independence* from vendors and *better ways of engaging* with vendors. The same tools can also support individuals' relations with schools, churches, government entities and other kinds of organizations.

To vendors, VRM is the customer-side counterpart of CRM (or Customer Relationship Management). VRM tools provide customers with the means to fulfill their side of the relationship burden. They relieve vendors of the perceived need to "capture," "acquire," "lock in," "manage," and otherwise employ the language and thinking of slave-owners when dealing with customers. ... Customers are involved as fully empowered participants in the vendor-client relationship, rather than as captive followers.

- VRM Principles  
VRM development work is based on the belief that *free customers are more valuable than captive ones* — to themselves, to vendors, and to the larger economy. To be free —
1. Customers must enter relationships with vendors as **independent actors**.
  2. Customers must be the **points of integration for their own data**.
  3. Customers must have **control of data they generate and gather**. This means they must be able to share data selectively and voluntarily.
  4. Customers must be able to **assert their own terms of engagement**.
  5. Customers must be **free to express their demands and intentions outside of any one company's control**.

**What does VRM enable?**

No more filling out forms with the same information time and again.

Portable data - take your own data from one service to another. Don't like Twitter's terms of service? Take your whole tweet stream, followers, and follow list to a different service. (Tent.is is doing this now).

Transactions on the fly. (I need a baby stroller in Los Angeles from the 3rd through the 5th and I'm willing to pay X.)

I'm willing to pay X to talk with a customer service rep in 60 seconds. (Personal RFP)

Health care data that you control

Inventory

Better personalization and customization thanks to richer data stores

**Pre-VRM**

Server/client = calf/cow

You're a target. A wallet with eyeballs.

Your data is in a hundred different silos, and it's incomplete, outdated, and inaccurate to some measure in each one.

**Post-VRM**

Users own their data; it's no longer distributed in silos. Users control where their data is stored and how it's shared.

A new way of thinking about the relationship between customers and vendors. A way to enhance trust between buyers and sellers.

For example, customers who can directly signal their intent to buy cost the vendor less to acquire, and are predisposed to buy. There's much less waste in the system of connecting buyers and sellers

We can do better than just give the customer a choice of silos

In the VRM world, customers win because they have more control and better relationships with vendors. Vendors win because they get greater predictability, better product insights, and deeper, more meaningful relationships with more loyal customers

**VRM and IA**

The thing that makes all this happen is taxonomy, ontology, metadata. There is a vast potential for great work for information management professionals.

Think of all the possible things users can express preferences for: movies, restaurants, shopping, advice, articles, news, political candidates; someone will need to design the information systems that allow users to easily manage VRM data.

All this data needs to be standardized in order for the magic to happen

As information management professionals, we can and should be on the forefront of thinking about how to enable people to identify, store, and manage their own data.

**The VRM Ecosystem**

Contrast to current system

Customers

**Personal Data Stores**  
All your stuff

**Personal RFPs**  
Signals from customers to vendors

**Identity management**  
Enables trust and accountability between parties

**Trust Frameworks**  
Provide legal mechanisms for enforcing trust between vendors and customers

**4th Party Systems**  
Works on your behalf with 3rd parties

Vendors

**Why it is**

There is a community of people who don't accept the status quo, that we are just kind of like the human batteries in the matrix, powering the marketplace with our information and attention. There's an imbalance in the marketplace's power structure that VRM seeks to redress.

VRM gives us control, increases trust, promotes accountability, and, in the end, makes the marketplace better for both buyers and seller.

There is a growing need for information security and privacy, and growing risks for individuals who do not control their own information.

**Call to Action**

Read the Project VRM Wiki

Explore a few of the services listed on the development page

Sign up for the mailing list

Visit Customer Commons

**Links**

- Project VRM: [http://cyber.law.harvard.edu/projectvrm/VRM\\_Development\\_Work](http://cyber.law.harvard.edu/projectvrm/VRM_Development_Work)
- XDI
- Tent.is
- Intention Economy
- Customer Commons

**Questions?**