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### WHAT IS THE TRUE COST OF OWNING AND MAINTAINING SOFTWARE?

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You need to consider the ongoing cost of training and support. Find out how much you will need to spend on training staff and if the vendor will be able to train new staff if you experience turnover. Ask who will answer your ongoing questions about using the software and if that person will be familiar with your customized system.

Then, inquire about how a vendor's upgrading process works and the fees involved. Find out if the vendor will try to sell you a new system every few years or if it has a development team that constantly improves its software.

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### HOW DO I KNOW IF THE SOFTWARE WILL WORK FOR ME BEFORE I PAY FOR IT?

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Investigate the software's track record of performance. Ask if, and where, it works for other organizations like yours and then visit those organizations. The more you know about a particular software and the vendor behind the product, the more you'll be able to evaluate if it's a good fit for your organization.

It is also important to express exactly what your needs are so a software vendor can show you how their product will accomplish each need. You also want to ask others in your industry about the software vendors you're considering. Check out the vendor's Web site and research the companies that associate themselves with that software vendor.

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### IS THE SOFTWARE FLEXIBLE AND RELIABLE?

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Look for software that will safeguard against common data entry errors and loss of information. You also need to know if the software can be tweaked to recognize terms familiar to your organization. Keep in mind that custom software cannot be easily adjusted, meaning any changes in the software programming could be costly and time consuming.

It's important to find a system that enables your entire organization to manage and automate tasks throughout different departments such as Membership, Communications and Finance. It should also give you a unified database so when a person updates a field anywhere in the system, it will automatically update the entire system. Additionally, the

software should have Web capabilities that either integrate or is part of the existing system.

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### WHAT DO I NEED TO KNOW ABOUT PACKAGED SOFTWARE VERSUS CUSTOM SOFTWARE?

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The advantage of custom software is that it can eventually work just the way you want it to work. However, a major disadvantage is that it is always unique and untested, so unfortunately you could be the test case. Custom software is also difficult to update and keep current.

Often times you will find packaged (off-the-shelf) software will allow you greater functionality and ability to adapt much faster in order to meet your organization's growing and changing needs.

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### IS THE SOFTWARE COMPATIBLE WITH OTHER COMMON PRODUCTS?

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You want to look for the total solution package. For instance, you want software with the Microsoft Open Data Base Connectivity (ODBC) standard so all Microsoft (and Microsoft compatible) products can use the same central database as the software.

Another feature to look for is Structured Query Language (SQL), which is integrated into Office 2000 and used by most modern programs to request information from the database. It also passes financial information to most major accounting systems.

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### HOW DO I GET TRAINING AND WHAT WILL IT COST?

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First find out if initial training can be done in-house or if you have to fly someone in. Ask the vendor if they will train you by using your own data and business practices.

Then, for continuous training purposes, see if there's Internet-based training available or regularly-scheduled training courses that you can attend.

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### IS THERE LOCAL TRAINING AND SUPPORT AVAILABLE?

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With some vendors, you receive only limited training and support because they want to keep a monopoly on knowledge about their product.

In other cases, you are forced to rely on a technical hotline with limited hours of live people to help you. This is a critical time issue if you are on the West Coast and buy software developed and supported by an East Coast company. The key is to buy locally-supported software so training or technical help is just a short drive or local phone call away.

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### IS THERE A LOCAL POOL OF TRAINED PEOPLE TO HIRE?

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This is essential for planning ahead. You'll need to know if you'll be able to find people familiar with the software or if you'll have to train every new hire. Hiring people already familiar with the software can infuse new ways to use its features and broadens your knowledge base.

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### IS THERE A WORKABLE UPDATE PROGRAM THAT IS EASY FOR YOU?

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You need to consider how often the vendor upgrades its software and if the process is a long costly one or a simple do-it-yourself procedure. Find out if the software vendor will send you a disk or CD of the updated version or if they pay to bring someone in to upgrade the system.

Also, ask if there are annual fees that will help pay for upgrades. If you have to pay for each upgrade, find out if you get any other services for your upgrade fees. All of these issues can make a big difference when considering long-term investment value.

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### HOW MUCH DOES THE VENDOR SPEND ON SALES, SUPPORT, AND DEVELOPMENT?

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While the amount spent on sales depends on current growth and the amount spent on support depends on the number of users, look carefully at the amount spent on development. Ask if the vendor has programmers dedicated to development or if their programmers split their time with other duties like consulting.

Writing complex programs is hard work in any programming language and takes a major, continuing investment. If a software vendor only has a handful of "full-time" programmers working on development, beware; they are not investing in its or your future.

## GETTING STARTED

If you are reading this, you've undoubtedly been given the daunting task of researching software solutions for your organization. With so much information and software available, it can be hard just figuring out where to start.

One important item to consider before you dive in is how the vendor sells their software. Some vendors do not actually sell their product directly, but through a channel of resellers. That can make a big difference when buying, implementing and maintaining software.

Most users incur huge costs in refining their specifications during implementation as they learn more about their own needs. With software, a six-month project often drags out to one or two years as more custom pieces have to be designed to work with each other.

Do not rely on vague promises that the software is easy to modify, in an easy language, or is "modular." Software always takes longer to implement than anyone plans and that can mean it will cost more money and resources than you initially anticipate.

But let's take a step back and start with the basics so you can prevent this from happening:

- **First:** Analyze your organization and find out what role you need the software to perform in achieving your organization's mission.
- **Second:** Evaluate what problems or limitations you have with your current software and/or multiple databases to determine your essential and desired functionality.
- **Third:** Compile a list of software vendors and their products that may meet the functionality needs determined in your analysis.

Once these steps have been accomplished, you must determine whether or not the software and vendor will meet your needs. Here are 10 key questions to help you purchase the perfect software solution for your organization.



Advanced Solutions International, Inc.  
901 North Pitt Street, Suite 200  
Alexandria, VA 22314-9541  
[www.advsol.com](http://www.advsol.com)  
1-800-727-8682

# 10 QUESTIONS you should ask **BEFORE** **BUYING** software.

*What Every Organization  
Needs to Know **BEFORE** Investing  
in a Software System*