

CRM Tools: Simple Systems to Track Customers and Grow Sales

Customer relationships are vital to a small business's success. A **Customer Relationship Management (CRM)** system helps startups and small teams track leads, follow-ups, and client details without getting overwhelmed. The good news is there are many **free or low-cost CRM tools** that offer robust capabilities for sales and marketing. In fact, experts note that **affordable CRM options like HubSpot, Zoho, and Freshsales provide valuable features on free or inexpensive plans**[\[1\]](#). Below, we explore the top 5 CRM solutions ideal for small businesses (teams of ~3 or fewer users), comparing their features – from sales pipelines and marketing integrations to AI tools and ease of use – and how they scale from free plans to paid versions.

Top 5 CRM Tools for Small Businesses (Free or Low-Cost)

1. HubSpot CRM (Free and Starter Plans)

HubSpot CRM is a popular all-in-one platform that offers a **generous free plan** for small businesses. The free CRM supports a limited number of users (up to two users in recent updates) and about **1,000 contacts** out-of-the-box[\[2\]](#). Despite being free, it's feature-packed: you get contact management and deal pipelines, email integration with tracking, meeting scheduler, live chat widget, and even an **AI-powered email content writer** to streamline outreach[\[2\]](#)[\[3\]](#). HubSpot's free version also includes basic marketing tools like web forms, ad-tracking, and landing pages to help capture and nurture leads[\[4\]](#). All these capabilities can help a small team **"get off the ground without paying a cent,"** thanks to HubSpot's user-friendly design and rich functionality[\[5\]](#).

However, the free tier has some limits – for example, HubSpot branding on emails/forms and capped usage of certain features. **Upgrading to the Starter plan (from about \$20/month)** lifts many limits, adding features like expanded email sends, automation workflows, additional dashboards, and removal of branding[\[6\]](#)[\[7\]](#). HubSpot is known for its **intuitive interface and easy onboarding**, so minimal training is needed[\[8\]](#). It also boasts **hundreds of third-party integrations** (Google, Microsoft, email marketing tools, etc.) via its marketplace[\[9\]](#), ensuring it can hook into your existing workflow. Do note that while the **free CRM is quite comprehensive, advanced capabilities (like deep marketing automation or AI analytics) come at higher-tier plans** which can get expensive[\[10\]](#)[\[11\]](#). Overall, HubSpot CRM is an excellent starting point for startups – **"a well-rounded, easy-to-use CRM"** with strong sales and marketing features on the free plan[\[5\]](#). Just be mindful that as your needs grow, HubSpot's paid tiers (while powerful) can become a significant investment[\[10\]](#).

2. Zoho CRM (Free Edition and Paid Plans)

Zoho CRM is another established platform offering a **Free Edition for up to 3 users** – perfect for a small team. The free version allows managing **5,000 records** (leads/contacts/accounts) and provides core modules for leads, contacts, deals, tasks, and a basic pipeline[12]. This covers the essentials of sales tracking and follow-ups, and even includes one sales pipeline, task management, and deal stage tracking to organize your funnel[13]. For a **solopreneur or very small operation**, Zoho also offers *Begin by Zoho*, a simplified CRM (free for one user, up to 500 contacts) focusing on a single pipeline – a great lightweight option[14]. However, the full Zoho CRM Free Edition has the advantage of allowing a small team of three to collaborate. Keep in mind that the free tier is limited in advanced features: for example, **lead scoring, sales forecasting, and quotes are only available in paid tiers of Zoho CRM** (not in free)[15].

One of Zoho's strengths is how much you can get as you move to its affordable paid plans. The **Standard plan is around \$14/user/month**[16], and it unlocks many capabilities: workflow automation, multiple sales pipelines, mass emails, custom fields, and more integration options. Zoho is part of a large suite of Zoho business apps, so it **integrates seamlessly with Zoho's other tools** (like Zoho Books for accounting, Zoho Campaigns for email marketing, etc.) and supports integrations with Google Workspace, Office 365, and 900+ other extensions via its marketplace[17]. Zoho also offers an AI assistant, **Zia**, which can do things like lead and deal predictions, but **AI features are available in higher editions (Enterprise and above)** – not in the free or basic plans[18].

It's worth noting that **Zoho CRM is incredibly feature-rich and highly customizable**, which is great for growing businesses with complex needs. You can tailor fields, workflows, and even modules to your processes. The trade-off is that **Zoho's interface can feel overwhelming, and the learning curve is steeper** for new users compared to some rivals[19][20]. Many small teams report that initial training is needed to get comfortable with Zoho's myriad of options. In comparison to HubSpot, for example, Zoho provides more flexibility and automation for the price, but **HubSpot's interface is more intuitive and requires less training**[8]. In summary, Zoho CRM is a **budget-friendly powerhouse** – its free edition covers basic needs, and its low-cost paid plans offer advanced CRM functionality (great for scaling up), as long as you're prepared for a bit of complexity in the user experience.

3. Freshsales (Freshworks CRM)

Freshsales (part of the Freshworks product family) is a modern CRM well-suited for small sales teams, and it stands out by offering a **free plan for up to 3 users**[21]. Even the free tier is quite robust for sales: you get contact and account management, a visual sales pipeline/kanban board to track deals, and a dashboard for monitoring your sales process[21]. Impressively, Freshsales's free plan **includes built-in phone and email tools** – you can log calls or even have a basic phone dialer, and send/track emails, which many



CRMs reserve for paid plans. It also provides a meeting scheduler and even allows tracking **website visitor activity and a basic chatbot** on your site in the free version[22]. Moreover, Freshsales offers something rare: **24/5 support even on the free plan** (access to phone, chat, email support on weekdays)[23] – a big plus if you’re new to CRM and might need guidance.

Freshsales is often praised for its **clean, modern interface and ease of use** – it’s designed to be intuitive for sales reps[24]. It may not have quite as many third-party integrations out-of-the-box as some competitors (a *con* noted by some users)[25], but it does integrate with common tools like Gmail/Outlook, calendars, and has an open API/Zapier for more. One of Freshsales’s key differentiators is its emphasis on **AI-driven insights** (via its “Freddy AI” engine). While the free plan gives you basic CRM functions, upgrading to a paid tier unlocks Freddy AI features such as **lead scoring, deal win predictions, and next-step suggestions** to help you prioritize and close deals[26]. In fact, industry analysts named Freshsales the “top free solution” for AI CRM capabilities, combining **Freddy AI for lead scoring/forecasting with an easy-to-use interface**[24]. The first paid tier (Growth) is relatively affordable (around **\$15/user/month**, sometimes less if billed annually)[27], and adds on advanced workflows, AI lead scoring, sequence automation, and higher limits.

In terms of marketing features, Freshsales is primarily sales-focused, but it can integrate with Freshworks’ other products (like Freshmarketer for marketing automation) if needed. It does include handy sales/marketing crossover tools like website forms and a chatbot to capture leads, even on free[22]. Overall, Freshsales CRM is **a great choice for small teams that want a simple, effective sales CRM with a taste of AI**. It’s “**easy to use**”[28] and comes with strong communication tools (built-in phone, email, chat), making it ideal for teams that do a lot of outreach and follow-ups without needing a separate phone system or external add-ons.

4. Pipedrive

Pipedrive is a highly popular CRM among small businesses, known for its **visual sales pipeline and simplicity**. Unlike the others on this list, Pipedrive does *not* have a free-forever version – it offers a free trial, then paid plans starting around **\$15–\$19 per user/month** (the “Essential” or “Lite” plan) depending on billing cycle[29]. Despite the lack of a free tier, many small teams find Pipedrive worth the low cost due to its laser focus on helping you **close deals faster with an intuitive interface**. The system uses a drag-and-drop pipeline board that lets you see all your deals by stage at a glance, and move them through stages easily. In fact, Pipedrive is often cited for *excelling in ease of use* – it’s a “**visually-driven CRM with a focus on ease of use,**” designed by salespeople for salespeople[30][31]. Onboarding new team members is quick, and the CRM doesn’t overwhelm you with extraneous features.

In terms of features, Pipedrive covers all the sales management basics: contact and deal management, task reminders, calendar integration, and customizable pipelines and fields.



It also includes built-in email integration (you can sync your Gmail/Outlook and send emails from Pipedrive, with open/click tracking) and has features like proposal generation and product catalogues in higher tiers. Recently, Pipedrive has infused **AI-powered tools** into the platform – notably an “**AI sales assistant**” that is available even on lower plans[32]. This AI assistant (often called *Smart AI*) analyzes your deals and activities and can suggest the next actions or generate insights (for example, recommending when to reach out to a stagnant lead). All Pipedrive plans also come with automation capabilities (like automating follow-up emails or deal stage actions). The CRM integrates with **hundreds of third-party apps** and services[32] – from Slack to Trello to accounting software – and has an open API and Zapier support, so it can hook into most workflows. Pipedrive is mostly a pure sales tool, so it doesn’t natively offer things like email marketing campaigns or a website builder (it assumes you’ll integrate those separately if needed). However, you can create web lead capture forms in Pipedrive and embed them on your site to feed leads directly into the CRM.

Overall, if your primary need is a **streamlined sales pipeline tool that your team will actually enjoy using**, Pipedrive is a top contender. It’s “**ridiculously easy to use**” and **focused on activities that drive deals**[33]. Small businesses that implement Pipedrive often appreciate how it boosts their sales organization without a steep learning curve. Just factor in the ongoing subscription cost – it’s low, but not free – and potentially budget for add-ons (Pipedrive has optional add-ons for advanced reporting, chatbot, and email marketing, which cost extra). For many, the efficiency gains and improved pipeline visibility make it worthwhile.

5. Bitrix24

Bitrix24 is a bit of a hidden gem for small businesses looking for **an all-in-one solution**. It’s not just a CRM – it packs in project management, team collaboration, customer support, and even website building capabilities, many of which are available in its **Free plan**. Notably, Bitrix24’s free cloud plan **allows unlimited users** (with a cap on storage)[34], making it extremely attractive for small companies or larger teams on a tight budget. You can store an unlimited number of contacts and deals for free, and use a broad range of features: contact management, deal pipeline tracking, task and project management, document sharing, group chat, web forms, and basic email marketing tools are all included[35]. Bitrix24 even provides a **website/landing page builder** and the ability to host an online store within the platform[36][37] – a unique offering for a CRM. All of this comes at no cost to start, which is why it’s often cited as a very “**generous free plan**” for startups[38].

Beyond core CRM, Bitrix24 includes workflow automation (e.g., you can automate lead assignments or follow-up tasks) and has a module for telephony so you can integrate phone call tracking or call your leads. It also has some **AI-powered features** built in – the platform advertises “**AI assistance**” for things like automated chat bots or contact center intelligence[39]. While perhaps not as advanced as the AI in dedicated CRM tools, it’s

continually improving. When it comes to integrations, Bitrix24 is designed to be a one-stop ecosystem (it has its own suite of tools in CRM, project, HR, etc.), but it still offers integration options with external apps – for example, it can sync emails from Gmail/Outlook, connect with telephony providers, and more. There’s a Bitrix24 marketplace for additional extensions and API support for custom integrations.

The **big consideration with Bitrix24 is ease of use**. Because it’s so feature-rich, the interface can be **overwhelming for new users, and navigating its extensive functionalities requires a learning curve**[38]. Teams that prefer a very simple, straightforward UI might struggle with Bitrix24’s complexity[40] – there are many menus and options to configure. In other words, Bitrix24 trades simplicity for depth: you get an entire business management suite under one roof, but you’ll need to invest time to master it. For those willing to do so, it can replace a bunch of separate tools (CRM, task manager, chat, etc.) and save money. Bitrix24’s paid plans are also relatively affordable when you need more: the basic paid tier starts around \$49/month (covers 5 users, if billed annually)[34], which comes out to roughly \$10 per user and unlocks higher-level features and storage. All in all, Bitrix24 is ideal for small businesses or startups that **want a free, comprehensive platform that goes beyond CRM** – including building your website, running campaigns, and managing internal projects. Just ensure your team is prepared for a more complex tool. Those who take advantage of its full capabilities will find it extremely powerful (almost like getting a mini Salesforce+Slack+Asana in one), whereas those who need only a simple contact tracker might find it “too much” for their needs.

Comparison of Top 5 Small-Business CRM Options

To wrap up, here is a side-by-side comparison of these five CRM tools, highlighting their free plan offerings, key features (including integrations and AI), entry-level pricing, and ease of use:

CRM	Free Tier (Users & Contacts)	Key Features & Strengths	Upgrade Starting Price	Ease of Use
HubSpot CRM	Free for 2 users; ≈1,000 contacts[2]	All-in-one sales & marketing (contacts, deals, email, forms, chat). Includes reporting dashboard and an AI email writer even on free[2]. Huge marketplace of	Starter Suite from \$20/month (includes more automation & higher limits)[7].	Very intuitive (modern UI, minimal training needed)[8]. Widely praised for ease-of-use.

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		integrations (Gmail, Outlook, Slack, etc.) [9] .		
Zoho CRM	Free for 3 users; 5,000 records [12]	Feature-rich CRM with leads, deals, one pipeline, tasks on free. Part of Zoho's large suite (integrates with email, Office 365, G Suite, etc.) [17]). Highly customizable and lots of automation available in paid plans.	Standard plan \$14/user/month (adds workflows, multiple pipelines, scoring, etc.) [16] .	Moderate – interface has a steeper learning curve [19] . Powerful but can be overwhelming without training.
Freshsales	Free for 3 users; (unlimited contacts)	Sales-focused CRM with pipeline, contact management, built-in phone & email tools. Offers website lead capture forms, chatbot, and 24/5 support on free [23] . Part of Freshworks suite (integrates with Freshdesk, etc.).	Growth plan ~\$15/user/month (adds AI lead scoring, workflows, more emails) [27] .	Easy – Clean, modern UI that's easy to navigate [24] . Designed for quick adoption by sales teams.
Pipedrive	<i>No free tier</i> (14-day	Visual pipeline	Basic (Essential)	Very easy –

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	free trial)	CRM – drag-and-drop deal board, activities & reminders. Strong email integration and sales automation. Includes an AI sales assistant on all plans for insights[32]. 300+ app integrations available[32].	plan \$15/user/month (approx., billed annually)[29]. Higher plans add more automation & marketing features.	“focus on ease of use” with a simple, visual interface[30]. Quick to learn for teams.
Bitrix24	Free for unlimited users; Unlimited contacts[34]	All-in-one platform: CRM + project management + team chat + website builder. Free plan offers pipelines, tasks, web forms, quotes, and even basic email marketing[35]. On-premise option available. Some AI features (chatbot, etc.) included[39].	Basic Plus plan \$49/month for 5 users (≈\$10/user) – unlocks additional features and storage[34].	Challenging – Very feature-rich, which requires a learning curve [38]. UI can be complex; not as immediately user-friendly for beginners.

Sources: The above comparison is based on product documentation and reviews, including the U.S. Chamber of Commerce guide to free CRMs[2][34], expert software reviews[4][38], and vendor information as of 2025.

Conclusion

Choosing the right CRM comes down to your team's needs and capacity. All of the options above allow a small business to **organize contacts, track sales opportunities, and improve customer follow-ups** without a large investment. If you want an easy start with a solid mix of sales and marketing tools, **HubSpot's free CRM** is extremely attractive (just mind the limits as you grow)[4]. For those who value flexibility and automation at a low cost, **Zoho CRM** provides a powerful toolkit – as long as you don't mind a more complex interface[8][19]. **Freshsales** is a great choice for an intuitive, sales-focused system with strong built-in communication tools and some AI capabilities to boost productivity[24]. **Pipedrive**, while not free, may be the best investment for a team purely focused on sales pipeline management given its ease of use and proactive AI sales assistant[32][30]. And if you're looking for an all-encompassing platform that can centralize your business operations (and you're willing to spend time learning it), **Bitrix24** offers an unparalleled feature set at no cost[36][38].

Ultimately, even a simple CRM can make a huge difference for a startup or small business – helping you **stay organized, follow up consistently, and build better customer relationships** to fuel growth. All these tools have free trials or free plans, so you can experiment and find which CRM feels most comfortable for your team. With the right CRM in place, you'll be able to track your customers and prospects more easily and **grow your sales without the overwhelm**, leveraging integrations and even AI helpers as needed to work smarter. The key is to get started with one that matches your immediate needs, and scale up its usage (or tier) as your business grows. Each of the above options can support that journey in its own way, turning simple customer tracking into a foundation for sales success[41][24].

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