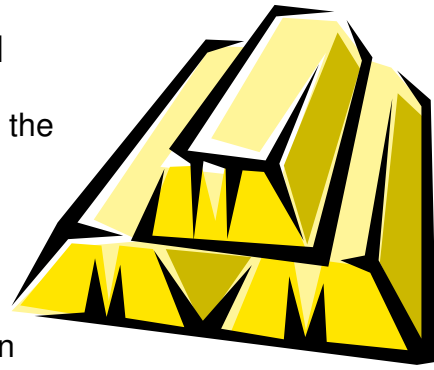


Your Data Is Worth Its Weight In Gold! Part 1

This is the first in a series of articles that will explore the importance of quality data and mailing lists that you maintain. I will discuss the foundation needs of a database, what fields are necessary and why. I will also discuss some possible applications with data that is collected, what types of marketing tools you may use to acquire additional sales and how you can enhance your customer service level.



The backbone of any database, besides the software itself, is the organization and structure of the way the data is stored. It is critical to analyze all possibilities of what you may want to possibly do with your data in the future. Many organizations have legacy systems that have collected years of data and are storing them in ways that cannot be manipulated or exported to other systems for analysis. These types of systems are the most challenging and may require hours of labor to get to the point of “use full” data. Therefore, in an effort to help you setup a system from the beginning, I am only going to cover some basic elements.

1. Dedicated Fields for Data

You will want to have your data fields setup to receive data in a format that does not consolidate so much that it creates challenges for analysis and data manipulation later down the road. For example, create separate data fields for each name element.

- Pre Name would include short prefixes such as Mr, Mrs, Miss, Dr, Hon, etc.
- First Name would only include a full first name or first name initial and nothing else. It may include two first names for the spouse such as “Jim & Carol.”)
- Middle Name would only include the full middle name or initial
- Last Name would only include the surname of an individual. It would not include company names, a second persons name, or other extraneous information. For example say the first name has “Tyler” in it and the last name field reads “Anderson and Jim Smith.” This would be an incorrect method of entry.
- Post Name or Suffix would include only short abbreviations such as Jr, Sr, MD, CPA, CEO etc.
- Title field would include longer title names such as “Marketing Director”, “Director of Operations”, “Director of Financing and Public Affairs.” Do not put long titles in the post name or suffix field. It makes the name line too long when trimmed together on the mailing panel.
- Firm/Company field would only include the name of the firm or organization.

- Secondary Address (also known as Address 2 or Line 2) This field is one of the critical fields and must have data entered into it correctly. The United States Postal Service reads an address label from the bottom up. Many people will address an item such as:

ABC Company
 125 Main St SW
 Suite B-250
 Tacoma WA 98403

This would be an incorrect format. The suite number should be above the primary address line. It is easy to get into this habit if you insert this field into your database on top of the primary address and train your data entry staff to key in the data in this manner. The secondary address will include only secondary address elements. These would include suite numbers, apartment numbers, floor numbers, building numbers, mail stop numbers, etc.

- Primary Address entry is critical. You only have to place the street or PO Box information into this field – whichever is the mailing address. If you have a street address and a PO Box then you can place the PO Box in the primary address line and the physical address in the secondary address line. For example:

ABC Company
 125 Main St SW Ste B-250
 PO Box 1255
 Tacoma WA 98406

The zip code used must be for the primary address (in this case PO Box 1255.)

The zip code for the PO Box can be different from that of the street address. Be sure that you have a field for the zip code of the street address as well as the PO Box.

- City should be a dedicated field all in its own
- State should only include the two-letter abbreviation for State names or the province abbreviation for Canada. These are also only two letters long.
- ZIP (Zone Improvement Plan) Codes should be in their own field and may include the ZIP+4 extension after them with or without a dash. A Canadian postal code could also be placed in this field but the format of their codes must be done precisely. Letter – number – letter combination alternating with a **space** between the first three characters. For example: M1D 1E2 or K4Q 8X9 are acceptable. Do NOT place a dash or run all the characters together.
- Country will only need to be included on non-domestic addresses such as Canada, Mexico and all other foreign entities. Simply place the name of the country in this dedicated field.

- You may want to add additional fields for such information as e-mail address, phone number (add several for toll free, and additional lines) home number, FAX number, URL (Universal Resource Locator) or web address, interests of your clients, purchases, future wish list purchases, and past activity.

Consistent data input is the key to success. If you don't put the same type of information in the proper fields each time it will skew your queries and data manipulation later down the road. You may want to perform statistical analysis, marketing reports, customer surveys or do a complex letter with a mail merge that pulls this data in. Remember, to plan ahead and try to think off all the possible bits of information you may want to track in the future. Setup your database to include this type of information. Databases need to be dynamic and not so rigid that you cannot make adjustments to them. Relational databases are a great way to organize data so that you can add and remove fields later on without jeopardizing the integrity of your entire database.

The next segment will cover what types of applications you may need to do with your data to extract useful information out of it. These will include reporting, analysis, duplicate detections and manipulations, and variable merging to do targeted personalized marketing.