

## **Maximize Success, Minimize ‘Crash and Burn’**

By Frank McPherson

It comes as no surprise to most marketers that, when it comes to Variable Data Print (VDP), the element that can create the highest, “knock your socks off” results is the same element that can cause these programs to crash and burn — the data. But did you know that fixing your data is a relatively straightforward process? In this article, we’ll look at some of the most common issues facing VDP marketers (and *all* database marketers) and provide some recommendations to allow you to maximize the use of your data.

### **1. Got Data?**

It sounds intuitive, but in order to personalize documents, you must either have the data in the first place or enhance your data using third-party lists. Most companies gather their customers’ names, addresses, city and province, and postal codes, but little more. If you want to personalize by gender, for example, you have to gather that information and include it as a separate field. Or if you want to personalize by interest or past purchase behavior, you must gather that information, too.

Anyone considering VDP as a marketing strategy should start capturing more than just basic information. There are lots of ways to do this. You can set up registration pop-ups on your Web site. You can set up a loyalty program that collects detailed information when customers sign up. You can collect additional information in your customer call center. You can use direct mail or email prospecting. Whatever method you use, start using it now so that the data is available when you need it.

There is a certain amount that can be done by the data processor, such as using software to automatically genderize a list based on first name, but there are limitations. North American genderizing software can do a pretty good job of sorting through the most common names, for example, but what do you do with gender-neutral names like Terry or Chris? Alternative spellings, such as Candi? Or many international names, like those from Eastern Europe or the Middle East? These often get assigned a default

setting. In metropolitan regions, it's not unusual for one-quarter or half of a mailing to end up in the default file. It's far better to capture the information in the first place.

## **2. Missing data fields.**

Even if companies *do* collect information, it's often collected inconsistently. First names might be missing, or instead of a name, the record might contain only an initial. Who wants to receive a letter that says, "Dear J"? (This carries over for too much information, as well. In one client database, instead of writing in a name, one of their salesmen wrote "the nice blonde who works at McDonalds"!) Furthermore, if you are running the data through a genderizing program, all of these will end up in the default setting.

Other problems can arise, as well. Some programs driven 100% from data can end up with huge chunks of missing information. We have one client for whom we do variable imaging letters that are so data-dependent that, if a key piece of information is missing, you can end up with blank pages or half-pages where the information should go. There are tricks to avoid this, but they are time-consuming and labor-intensive.

Serious errors resulting from missing information occurs with addresses, as well. We had an incident years ago where a retailer only provided the building address to a large office tower where most of his clients worked, but no suite numbers. As a result, half the mailing didn't reach his clients. In a related example, a client truncated the addresses in one of the address fields, so much of the mailing was returned.

## **3. Who's got your data?**

Another challenge facing many VDP marketers is that they *do* have detailed data, just not at the corporate level. The data may be collected by the sales person, who keeps it in their personal contact management program, or in isolated databases in other areas of the company, such as sales, customer service, or billing, where marketers cannot get at it easily.

To get the most out of your VDP marketing efforts, you should centralize your data as much as possible. If your salespeople are your primary contact with

customers, they should be inputting their contact information into a company database and doing it in a consistent format from salesperson to salesperson. There should also be a plan to merge all of the data from the various departments.

#### **4. Outdated or incorrect data.**

Just as someone doesn't want to receive a personalized mailer with "Dear J," they also don't want to see their name spelled wrong. Most businesses maintain the names, phone numbers, and addresses of their customers, but how often is that database reviewed or updated for correct address, phone number, and email address? Do you know who, at that address, you are talking to? What their gender is? Postal software will check for change of address, but it is only current for a three-month period. And it only checks and corrects addresses, not other marketing-critical information.

Even if information contained in your database is accurate, it may not be in a useful format, such as properly separated into fields. Both first and last name may reside in the same field, for example, or you might find the first name in the last name field and the last name in the address field. These things can be fixed, but it will cost you time and money, and there is a certain amount of guesswork and potential for error. It is much better to have the correct data in the correct fields in the first place.

#### **Data — It's Everybody's Problem**

These problems are not restricted to small or mid-sized companies. In fact, they may arise even more commonly in larger companies, where the volume of data leads to speedy entry and mistakes, especially when this task is farmed out to third-party providers. Knowledgeable VDP service providers can work through many of these issues for you, often by developing specialized software programs, but there are limits. Plus, it costs money. We also find that, even after we have fixed our customers' VDP databases, they often fail to return that corrected data to their company databases, so we tend to see the same issues over and over, even from the same clients.

## Data Best Practices

Here is a brief list of some best practices to help you get the most out of your data:

**1. Make data core to your business.** Most companies don't see data as important to their business, but data is everything. Make it a priority.

**2. Gather data on the front end.** You can't market with data you don't have. Develop programs for building your database, capturing all of the variables you think might be helpful in your marketing efforts.

**3. Centralize your data.** Data doesn't do you any good unless you can access it. Get the customer information out of personal contact and other databases and into a company-wide system.

**4. Regularly review and update data.** Ensure that, when data is entered into the database, everyone responsible for entering it is adhering to established standards. Then, once that the data is input, make sure that it is regularly reviewed, updated, and that obsolete records are culled.

**4. Get IT on board.** Consistently, one of the stumbling blocks to VDP campaigns is the lack of cooperation from the IT department, which is not used to communicating with marketing and developing databases for marketing purposes. IT needs to be on board with this process from the beginning. Find out what data you have before the project is designed and make sure that the necessary data is provided in the right format. You don't want to end up with a beautifully designed piece, then realize you don't have the data to support it. Also plan to incorporate the corrected data back into the system so that you don't have to deal with the same database issues more than once.

**5. Unless you know that you are giving your service provider clean and complete data, give them adequate time.** When a customer's database is large and needs extensive work, it can take several days to work through everything. It's become common practice to expect everything back the next day, but that doesn't work with databases. You can have it fast or you can have it right. Take your pick.

None of these observations are meant to scare marketers from using VDP. On the contrary, knowledgeable service providers can do miracles with even the most out-of-date and error-riddled database. There is also a lot you can do, even with a minimal database. The point is simply that, whatever you do, you can always do it better, and by using best practices, you can do it more quickly and less expensively, too.