



It's in the mail

BY DAVID MAIDA

A contact centre may stand or fall on the quality of its database, but ensuring that its details remain current is an ongoing and challenging task, as David Maida discovered.

Keeping a contact centre database up to date and accurate often requires more than just recording a name, address and phone number. As more information about clients is gathered, the organisation's databases are becoming increasingly valuable.

Simon Pohlen, Wellington manager for Proximity ID, says companies are now realising it's critical that they collate all the information ever collected about every client.

"If we go through the time and effort to get customers to tell us more about themselves so that we can better identify what kind of products they might be interested in, then we have a duty to the customer not to throw that information away and end up asking them the same questions again in a years time."

For organisations without the latest technology, modifying a database to accurately record full and accurate contact details is especially difficult.

"Sometimes their systems make it difficult to quickly add extra details about a person. It may not be an easy thing for them to do."

And how much authority should front-line contact centre staff have to modify the database when they're told someone no longer lives at an address can be a difficult issue.

"It's a grey area. On the one hand you want to be able to update that information because it just seems like best practice. But by the same token, you do have to be mindful of how the customer is going to feel about that and whether they feel like they've authorised it."

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Pohlen says management also need to consider what kind of access front-line staff should have if they aren’t company employees.

“A company might engage an outbound contact centre on a contract campaign basis and those centres don’t necessarily have access to the company’s own internal systems.”

Effective databases are more than just a collection of emails, phone numbers and addresses – they often contain notes on how the customer prefers to be contacted. Pohlen says this information is valuable in creating an ongoing, productive relationship with the client.

“Where we’re getting to now is that there really isn’t a single channel through which all customers would like to be communicated, whether we’re talking about service messages or sales and marketing messages. It really is about putting in place the infrastructure to be able to manage that at a customer level.”

Amway regional contact centre manager Gay Reed-Barrance says staff training and access restrictions are key to maintaining a database.

“When people are brand new, we make sure that they understand the business and have the skills and knowledge to utilise the system effectively before we give them full access to change too much so we minimise mistakes.”

There is a seven-day training programme for all Amway call centre staff.

“They do lots of role-plays and some tests and there is an exam at the end of their induction training before they go live.”

Intense call monitoring also shows how staff are interacting with the database.

“If someone’s not particularly competent, they will take longer to go from screen to screen. That could give one of our quality coaches a clue that perhaps this person needs a little more one-on-one coaching.”

Reed-Barrance also says that prudent design of the software is essential so that staff can get anywhere they need to in five clicks or less. But another way to ensure a customer’s data is correct is to let them enter it themselves.

Scott Fuller, managing director of Database Communications, says 75 per cent of his customers enter their own information via the Internet.

“It’s an awful lot better to get people to enter their data at a website because then there are no mistakes. The customer’s in control of his own data. No one is keying anything in and they can maintain their data at the website.”

Lured in by viral marketing campaigns, customers enter their data directly into the database. But this can result in vanity addresses whereby people live on the border of a suburb but like the sound of the suburb adjacent to them better. These browser-based databases on a centralised system are far more effective than one which sits on a client’s server, Fuller says.

“If you have an in-house system which is totally yours, you’ve got to invest in the hardware, the people, the training and the processes.”

But even with an online system, Fuller says training is essential.

“If people don’t know why they’re doing something then they’re quite likely to put in rubbish or change things which shouldn’t be changed. But giving them access is absolutely imperative.”

Without properly trained staff the database begins to deteriorate quite quickly.

“The worst thing that can happen is that somebody enters a new record and they haven’t checked to see if one already exists. Duplicates will clog your system terribly.”

Sometimes it’s not what you put into the database, but rather what you can get out of it which can really propel your business.



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Snail mail on the move

For keeping address files accurate, nothing is more powerful than NZ Post’s Postal Address File (PAF). It contains 1.8 million addresses that are updated quarterly. Software vendors have built tools based on the PAF which act like an auto-complete function when addresses are entered. And for mailing fulfilment houses like the Mailshop, the PAF file is everything.

Data manager Richard Tabram says the advantage of NZ Post’s move from 500 postcodes to almost 9000 is that the PAF file will be a way of keeping company databases in check by using a software tool.

“It will update it, add the new postcode and the correct suburb and present it how NZ Post wants it,” he says.

The new postcodes will be mandatory for every postal address by July 2008. Organisations which have a certain percentage match between their mailing lists and the PAF file will qualify for the bulk postal discount.

Melanie Archibald, client services manager for Datamine Wellington, says organisations can be missing out if their different databases aren’t communicating with each other.

“They’re generally not using the information in the database to inform their decision making and use it to identify opportunities, whether they’re marketing related or not.”

The process is called data mining and can answer questions like:

What’s the best place for my store?

Who are my best customers that I really need to hang on to?

How do I find more people like the customers I’ve already got?

Should I run with two brands or dump one of them?

“Data mining is about getting those nuggets of gold that are trapped in these big black boxes.”

For companies like Foodstuffs, their customer database contains a lot more than just names, addresses and phone numbers.

“Some of the most valuable data is what people actually do, their behavioural data – what they bought, how much it was, how often they visit you.”

Linking the pieces of the puzzle through data mining can offer a whole new perspective.

“It’s using your data to give you insight about why people are calling, who your frequent callers are, and getting a greater understanding of who the stakeholders are and what’s going on.”

Often the valuable information in a contact centre is not passed on to management and sales and marketing.

“Contact centres are often a goldmine of information. They know probably the most about a lot of their company’s customers because they’re interacting with them all the time.” ■