Database Management: One Size Does *Not* Fit All

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BY ROBERT BLAEMIRE

"ONE SIZE FITS ALL" is a fitting description for a baseball cap but not for a database. A database, whether it is a voter file or some other list of names, should fit the data. The data should not be forced to fit the database.

In the mainframe environment, databases often exist with information jammed into fields where it doesn't belong. We often receive data from a large list vendor that uses a field called "Mailing Address" that is often a second person's name who lives in the household, a company name, an occupation, a professional title — or it's blank. Sometimes it is really a mailing address that differs from the residence. (A field is a part of a database where a certain piece of information is located and not other pieces of information. First names in the first name field, for instance, not last names, etc.) Whatever the case, this "one size fits all" mentality makes the database difficult to use without clean-up.

And databases that are difficult to process waste time and money — and lead to costly mistakes.

Similarly, small organizations that maintain their own databases create a structure and then force all kinds of information into that structure. Typically, that data will vary from individual records with home addresses, household records missing some of the individual information within the household, or businesses. In other words, there is no consistency.

Yet, the "one size fits all" mindset persists, and it points to trends in the computer industry that are affecting political campaigns and parties as well as membership organizations.

Mainframe Dinosaur

For years, the mentality within the computer business has been driven by mainframe processing and costs. Everything going through a computer processor was written by a programmer, and disk space and storage capacity were considerable cost items. Therefore, if a database contained a piece of information that required the addition of a new field on the database, the length of the field times the number of records plus indexing space meant higher costs and slower processing.

The mainframe mentality has led to the creation of complicated databases that are cumbersome and difficult to use. The old habit had been to retain information in an abbreviated code format. The new method is to store information in English, making the data obvious to the user. An example is the use of voter history in a campaign. Most firms used to maintain the data in a string of single character codes that required interpretation so the client could understand the data. While it was always stored the same way, the available data would differ by client and locality, leading to misinterpretation of the data and difficulties in data processing.

Now it is more likely that firms maintain voter history with obvious fields and obvious data. The 2000 General Election voter history, for instance, might be called G2000 with the data being a "Y" or a blank. The voter either cast a vote or he didn't. It's as simple as that.

The last few years, however, have seen a major shift from mainframe processing to PC networks. Additionally, and part of this trend, space on computers has become inexpensive and virtually irrelevant. While the speed of PC networks may not be as fast as mainframes, it is close enough to be acceptable. We could produce a count from a database of 2 million names on a mainframe, when we operated in that environment, in five seconds. The same database now, on a PC network, might take 15 or 20 seconds. But the current costs are a fraction of what they once were.

So the result has been a downsizing of hardware, the development of very fast and flexible software and systems that do not require highly paid programmers to execute every task. Our network, for instance, produces everything we do for our clients and virtually every process necessary is executed by any person on the staff.

And, unlike every other expense in a campaign, the costs of computer processing have gone down over the last few years. This decrease in costs has allowed for the development of more sophisticated databases and new, high-tech applications, particularly those that use the Internet.

We Can Do It In-House

The other trend, a result of the downsizing of the computer, has been the movement to create and

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manage the database in-house. Because so many people these days are competent on PCs, it feels logical to do it themselves rather than to pay a vendor. But just because a person writes letters doesn't mean he can also write a novel. Just because a person is competent with a video camera doesn't mean he should be making the campaign commercials. The same principle applies here. There is a huge difference between the capabilities of most people on their PCs, using even the best of available commercial software, and those of an experienced vendor.

A typical database maintained in-house doesn't differentiate between individuals and households. The available software doesn't allow for a flexible approach when shifting from individual selects to household selects. As mentioned above, organizations, PACs and companies are often mixed in with households and individuals in a continuation of the "one size fits all" mentality.

Moreover, dependence on an in-house operation usually means that the capabilities of that organization are defined by the experience and ability of one person.

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Maybe a staff of experienced professionals who do this for a living isn't always necessary, but it does offer a more secure environment for reliable data processing and the ability to take advantage of a wider variety of experiences in using databases of all kinds.

We've had many experiences with in-house operations. While many work fine, others experience problems with staff people quitting or getting sick, computers crashing with no readily available back-up system, theft of the actual computers and, far more likely, candidate orders being delayed – and these candidates are waiting in line behind *other* candidates who, of course, share the same election day.

The trends toward downsizing, inexpensive computer space and easier processing by non-programmers on PC networks all have benefits to campaigns, parties and organizations but a failure to react properly to these trends will often create new problems.

And, if those problems waste a campaign's time and money, two resources that are always in short supply, the campaign has hurt itself. ■

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Both can work in a decentralized manner and do not require participants to be in the same place at the same time. Campaigns can add others areas as the pilots yield results. Natural extensions include fundraising, advancing events, precinct and county organization, and most importantly, GOTV.

Campaign 2002

The Pew-funded Democracy Online Project reported, "Integrated communications is the key to campaign savings in time, money and personnel, as well as to unexpected payoffs." The sidebar article, "Campaign Decision-Making 101," describes a real-world conference and lessons learned. In many ways, campaigns are won or lost based on how well the candidate and staff respond to real-time events.

Campaigns that deploy computer conferences to augment their decision-making process will have a distinct advantage. These campaigns can mobilize tens or hundreds of volunteers putting them to work in new ways to add immediate value to the candidate's efforts. ■