

When Data Go Missing – And Why We Need to Fill the Gaps

The Latest on Using Telecommunications Data Sources for CRM Programs

By Peg Kuman, Telematch

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In this age of multi-million-dollar customer relationship management programs and equally expensive targeted prospect and customer contact strategies, the perils of missing or incorrect contact data can be costly. No matter if consumer or business-to-business data, the ability to fill accurately the missing information gaps can have a profound impact on marketing success and return on investment.

There are multiple paths toward solving the problem of missing data. Data vendors offer a variety of public and private sources, and several may fit the bill depending on the need, budget and purpose of the brand and marketer. Compiled lists and response lists are the traditional “go to” sources – but more and more marketers, who demand higher accuracy and sell-through, are seeking “hard-to-find” data sources – particularly as regulation and suppression erode the completeness and availability of existing data sources. There is too much opportunity lost, and waste being generated, by neglecting the integrity and completeness of contact data – especially as CRM systems and programs are so prevalent.

Another data source – self-reported data – also is relied upon by many marketers, primarily those with an existing customer relationship, and may include sources such as a Web-based lead or inquiry, membership affiliation or a response from a special-interest survey. Yet, even here, there are mixed results on the accuracy of such data. People don’t always tell the truth (especially true for Web-based inquiries), and data entry errors at the point of collection also can occur. Every incidence of self-reported data presents an opportunity to alter and undermine data accuracy.

The only way to know the accuracy of existing data append sources is to test them – and to test them periodically (or even regularly) against new data sources.

For three decades, telephone data have been a superb method for reverse appending postal address data as well as providing and confirming telephone contact information – however the completeness of telephone data as an “all-knowing” reliable source has been changing. In 2008, data from the Federal Communications Commission and the Cellular Telecommunications and Internet Association reveal that there are 364 million land lines in the United States, 263 million wireless accounts, 14 million cable-based telephone accounts, and 7 million private voice-over Internet protocol customers. According to the FCC, the total number of land lines is now dropping 7% per year, while wireless and broadband telephony is growing by 10% and 22%, respectively. Further, approximately 35% of land lines are non-published and/or unlisted, with a growth rate of 24% annually in these types of listings. Obviously there are growing numbers of households and businesses where contact information is hard to find, and even harder if one requires complete and highly accurate data.

Nonetheless, telecommunications data are still among the best sources for timely, accurate business and residential listings. Additionally, connect and disconnect information from the nation’s more than 4,000 telephone companies, where available, is still perhaps the best indicator of new move data within the United States.

Telecommunications data can be useful in determining where data are hard to find. My recommendation to clients is to take the net non-matches from standard telecommunication sources (white pages, yel-

low books, directory assistance and various public, private and shared sources) and set that data aside. Next, secure non-self-reported wireless and voIP data from various proprietary sources. Then, perform a matching exercise between these two files – and, voila, we have a new data source to fill in much of the gaps. Legally, there are restrictions on using such data (state and federal telemarketing restrictions, for example), but it is permissible to use such data when verifying existing customer relationships (honoring any internal suppressions), authenticating the identity of individuals, and conducting reverse postal appends – all very important processes in today’s customer-centric marketplace.

Of course, sourcing hard-to-find data presents the classic business trade-off – price versus value. You pay for what you get. Compiled data are less costly, but have less recency, and therefore less accuracy – though it is perhaps the optimal solution for the budget conscious. Telecommunications data are more costly but are highly accurate. Hard-to-find data, also from telecommunications sources, are more costly still – but it enhances the overall value of data particularly as CRM programs may experience increasing incidence of inaccurate contact data.

Where return on marketing objective and return on CRM investments rely on highly accurate customer contact data, having a testing regimen for hard-to-find data sources may be an excellent way to ensure at least the data component of these programs is up to par.

SmartMatch™ is Telematch’s data game-changer -- a first-of-its-kind public/private database made up entirely of wireless, cable and VoIP residential listings, 97 Million to-date with complete name and addresses. This reverse append-only database is made up of currently all available non-traditional lines, with no information self-reported, and all of it responsibly sourced. While others have talked about the need for a database that mirrors the new telecommunications platforms, only Telematch has developed such a solution – and, in testing, has delivered timely, accurate contact data previously thought to be lost in the marketplace.

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