

DATABASE MARKETING • When paper beats silicon

Quality research begins with quality data

By MARGARET R. ROLLER

Along with good questionnaire design, user-friendly appearance (including the use of color and "white space") and convenience features (such as a postage-paid return envelope), a mail survey's success depends on the database from which the sample is drawn. Obviously, the poorer the database—in terms of people who meet certain criteria for inclu-

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sion and the accuracy of their personal information—the lower the return rate and poorer the response quality among those who do respond.

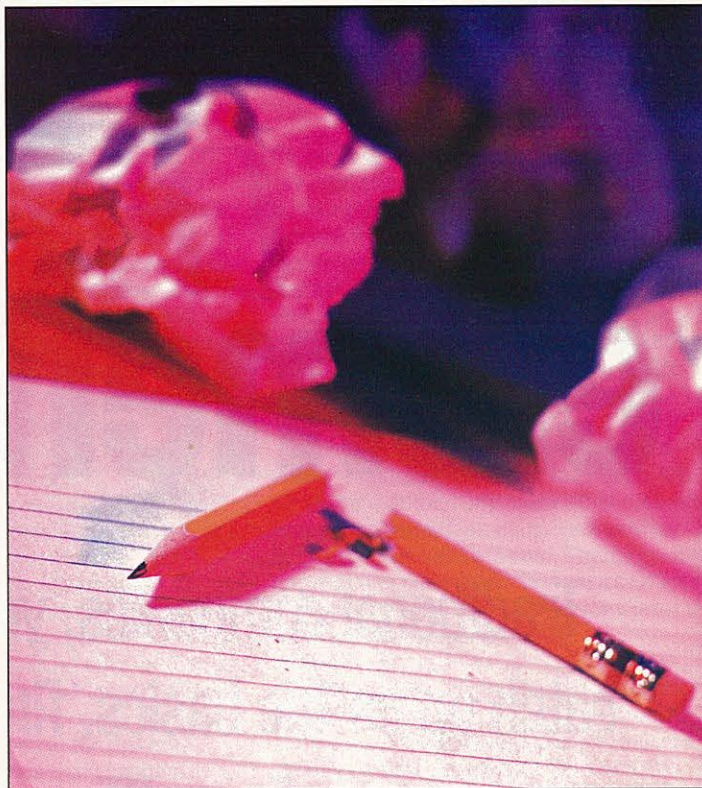
As all aspects of research design become more electronic in nature, it may be appropriate to remember research-design fundamentals and opt, in some instances, for the more antiquated, tedious-but-prudent path.

In the case of customer or volunteer databases, this may lead to increased survey returns and reduced sampling error.

A clear case in point has surfaced in conjunction with a volunteer-satisfaction research program my firm is designing for a large, nonprofit organization. At this program's core is a self-administered, mailed volunteer satisfaction survey among "active" volunteers, or those who have participated in an activity in the past year. A primary goal of this effort is designing a survey that, ultimately, the organization's regional internal staff can

track continually. With this in mind, we have made developing a fast, efficient method for obtaining a random sample of volunteers from each region's large volunteer database a key focus of this research design.

These priorities led us to recommend that regional samples be pulled from the organization's newly implemented electronic-database program. While it was widely speculated that, due to staff's comfort level with the new system and little, if any, screening of volunteers prior to being entered, this electronic format might not provide completely accurate volunteer information. Nevertheless, it was important to at least test the database program's usefulness; after all, the overall project's ultimate success lies in the ability and willingness of the organization's staff to track volunteer satisfaction over time, which is directly related to the ease of drawing a sample and distributing the questionnaire.



The volunteer satisfaction survey now has been tested in two of this organization's regions, with sampling derived from the electronic database. Both surveys' results have been disappointing: Between volunteer ineligibility and inaccurate address information, it is estimated that 40% to 50% of each region's active-volunteer database is unusable.

The volunteer databases' inadequacy was underscored by a subsequent volunteer-satisfaction survey that sampled from paper lists of active volunteers obtained at the local-office level instead of using the centralized electronic database. While gathering these lists was painful from both a time and labor standpoint, the rewards have been great: Where using the centralized electronic database as the sampling source yielded only a 7% return rate among active volunteers, the return rate using localized paper lists reached 50%. (To conserve resources, this study design consists of just one questionnaire mailing and one follow-up postcard reminder.) While there certainly are other factors affecting these results—the type of volunteers surveyed, for instance—it is clear that the more archaic list format provided by local offices is, at least for the time being, more efficient for sampling.

This volunteer-satisfaction research program's development now has become as much about reporting volunteer satisfaction as it has tackling the database issue. Indeed, in conducting additional regional surveys, a significant amount of time now is spent in obtaining localized lists; investigating the current database program and identifying ways to eliminate and update volunteer records as appropriate; and designing an approach to help the keepers of the database maintain an accurate, useful roster of active volunteers.

As a research firm, my company is not capable or inclined to provide database-management services. However, my firm would be negligent if it simply ignored the database issue as it relates to this research and leave the problem in the client's hands. In the end, no amount of proper sampling techniques can save a research program that is founded on outdated, inaccurate records of the constituency. ■

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