Q&A: David Bernard, DB Marketing Technologies

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David Bernard has studied marketers' database efforts for more than 20 years as a consultant with several firms and as managing director of his own CRM consulting firm, DB Marketing Technologies. He spoke to *Direct Marketing News* about the common mistakes of marketing database management and how to avoid them.

Direct Marketing News (DMN): Are most marketers neglecting their databases?

David Bernard: There is significant investment in database marketing and technology, but marketers are spending their time reacting to issues with their databases, in place of innovating with them. When you talk to marketers, you often hear "I feel hostage to my data." The database feels more like an 800-pound weight tied to their ankle rather than the rocket ship that's supposed to blast them to new heights in marketing effectiveness and sales.

DMN: *What are some mistakes marketers make?*

Bernard: There are structural issues with the database that are prone to ongoing error. For example, how you manage data collection from customers.

In a marketing-rich company, the variety of data you collect can be huge. Consistency is important. Being able to manage slight changes in data elements is important.

If the database itself is not designed to do that well, then the information that you're going to get out will not be right, and errors will ensue. That impacts segmentation, reporting, analysis and execution.

Issues with staffing and management of the database team can have a big impact as well. Having the right people with the right skills for the job is essential. Often that's not the case. Often you have overly technical people managing the CRM programs, but the technical people don't necessarily understand or have a background in the strategy of marketing.

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DMN: *Sounds like a lot of hands are involved, and supervision is necessary.*

Bernard: It's important that marketers and/or their advisers take a very hands-on and granular approach. They need to know when the vendor is slipping and provide direct and clear and immediate feedback.

There are two areas that need to be addressed: correction and continuous improvement.

The first thing you need to do to correct database issues is an audit. Because of all of the moving parts, marketing databases fall out of phase with requirements, especially when they have been neglected. So the purpose of the audit and any prescribed changes is to bring the database back to spec, to make sure that the business rules - defining who your customer is, how you treat them, the logic of segmentation - are clearly understood and properly executed in the database.

Next is continuous improvement. Marketers need to have skilled, objective, hands-on marketing database management to be able to request and oversee database changes that are needed as a result of any business requirements evolution. Further, marketers have to be able to immediately identify when a vendor slips or deviates from standard operating procedures so that errors can be immediately corrected - before they threaten program performance. Marketers may choose to do this themselves or hire a consultant to do it depending on the skills and focus of their departments. It's also important to develop contractual service-level agreements with your vendor; this way, vendor responsibilities and requirements are in black and white. The expectations of the client are very clear to the database provider.

Marketers need to review their business requirements and, consequently, what they are asking from the database regularly so that the information going into and coming out of the database is up-to-date and the marketers get the accurate insights they need.

DMN: *How often should a marketer audit databases?*

Bernard: We recommend every 18 months or two years. I look at it like teeth cleaning at the dentist: If you're good at flossing and you take care of yourself, they say you can come back every 6-to-12 months. If you are not good at that, then you have to come back every 4 months.

If the marketer has taken the steps to proactively manage their database, to proactively manage their vendors, if they have the skills and partners in place to do that proactive oversight, chances are that there will be fewer issues that accumulate over time, which means less maintenance, lower operating costs, and more accurate insights.

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