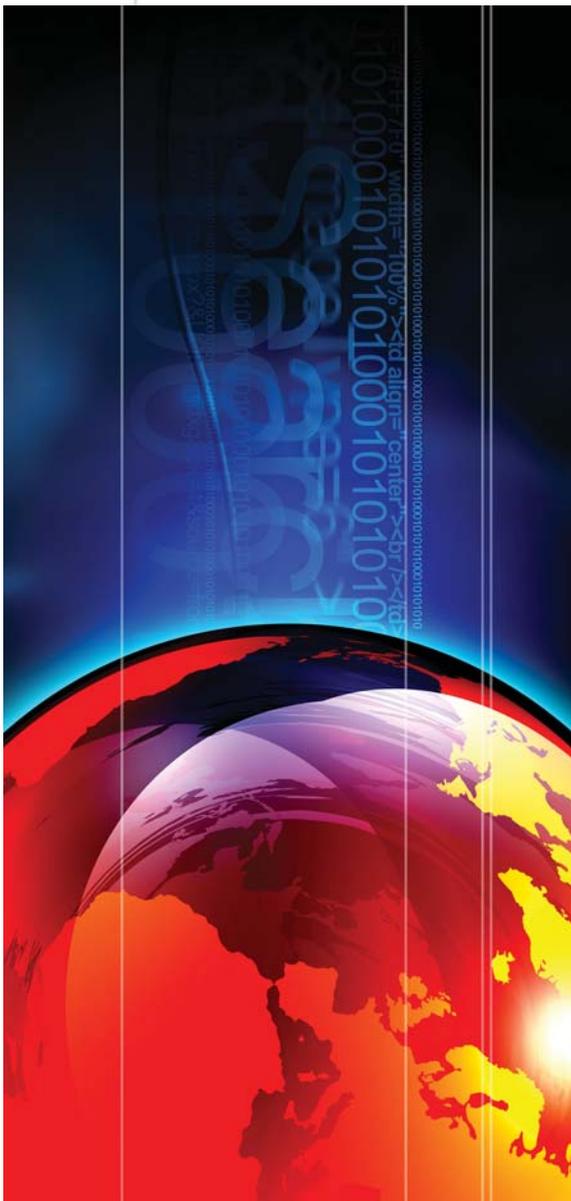


## DATA MATTERS

By **Stephanie Maddocks**



It all started with holiday cards. When I was a child, my Mom kept all her friends and family's addresses on 3x5 cards in a little recipe box in the kitchen, and would update them each December when a new holiday card arrived to announce all the changes from the past year. Of course, she would also diligently note who didn't send a card, because they would be put in a special section of the box — the circular file, I now realize. That was my first exposure to the value of good data ... and of the wrath of Mom if you didn't send a greeting card. Fast forward a few decades, and businesses now have computer systems and processes to keep track of valuable data, and the capacity to instantly sort, merge, print and, in general, manipulate that data to provide answers to relevant business queries.

Data is important. It is the foundation of all decisions that a business has to make to improve profitability, maximize efficiencies, address customer concerns and keep team members happy. Good data is easy to define: It is accurate, timely and relevant. It is the result of diligent and precise data entry. And it allows a business to be capable of making informed and timely decisions and to plan for a successful future.

Bad data is also easy to define: It is the GIGO theory — Garbage In/Garbage Out. When the data input, either manual or automatic, is flawed in any manner, the resulting data is bad. And sometimes it's stinky, nasty, really bad garbage data that, once used, becomes the basis for even worse decisions on the part of management. And worse yet, sometimes you don't even know it is bad data. That is the worst-case scenario.

Imagine a casino that prepares its first player's club mailing of the New Year, targeting all its prime customers for a Super Bowl promotion. The marketing department designs the most awe-inspiring (translation: expensive) invitation and asks the Information Technology department to "pull the list" of the top 10 percent of the player database. The IT team willingly complies, pulling the list of 5,000 names, and then marketing labels, stamps and merrily carries the completed invitations to the post office, smiling all the way. Fast

forward to the day of the big game and only 50 of these prime guests show up. What happened?

Well, of those 5,000 names, perhaps 25 percent had been entered incorrectly at the time the guest enrolled in the player's club, so those 1,250 awe-inspiring, postage-paid invitations were returned to the casino. Additionally, let's not forget the 25 percent who moved since they signed up for the player's club, resulting in 1,250 more fancy and expensive invitations either returned to the casino or forwarded to the player's new address ... to be delivered the day after The Game of the Century. And then there's the 25 percent who never completed their interest codes, so there's 1,250 people who did receive invitations but who don't like football anyway (soccer fans). So, while some may think a 4 percent return (50 of the remaining 1,250 people) is acceptable for this fabulous and expensive football promotion, most marketers (and all of management) would agree that 75 percent of this mailing could have been salvaged with just a few easy steps. (By the way, this may seem like an extreme hypothetical example, but it could happen to your casino.)

How do we make data entry better? Three easy steps, of course! First, automate data entry whenever possible. Second, clean and purge the database regularly. Third, allow players access to their profiles to provide updates whenever possible. And a free bonus hint for good data entry: training for all data entry personnel.

Initial data entry is the first place where an operation can get it all right or all wrong. Automated data entry targets the initial interaction of data with a database system, and there are many tools that provide for it. Retail barcode systems are a prime example. While many casinos have barcode technology in their retail shops to automatically scan items and enter prices, how long would it take for casino accountants to determine the return on investment to justify a retail barcode system if prices were consistently manually entered too low or sales tax was calculated incorrectly? Another example is a 2-D barcode or magnetic-stripe reader for driver's licenses that automatically populates most data for a player's club profile at enrollment — as opposed to each of those very important players' crucial names and addresses getting subjected to the nervous typing skills of a newly hired player's club representative.

Automation at points-of-sale, the player's club and other customer touch locations guarantees not only data accuracy, but also transaction speed and efficiency. In addition, automation within the back-of-the-house organization can ensure faster and more accurate transactions in areas such as food and beverage, warehouse, and shipping and receiving. Take a look at all the player touch points and operational areas within the casino that require data accuracy (hint: that's just about everywhere) and determine how they can be improved through automated data entry. And if there's a casino out there that is still manually inputting its soft count currency drop, stop reading right now and call me.

Once the data has been entered — hopefully in some accurate and automated manner — the second step's goal is to ensure data integrity going forward. It's clean up time! Over time, data changes and updates are required. Simple things like prices of food items may change daily, and need to be updated in the F&B inventory and purchasing systems. Players move. Exchange rates fluctuate for currency exchange conversions. All of these pieces of data require revisions, and someone within the organization must be assigned the task of updating data for each of the relevant systems.

Of course, it's not enough just to update the data. Sometimes it must be scrubbed and purged to maintain the databases. Food items are removed from a menu; players pass on to the great casino

in the sky; countries collapse and discontinue their currency (admittedly, this doesn't happen all that often). All this requires monitoring and updates to ensure on-going accuracy and relevancy of the data that is used for so many important purposes. The National Change of Address (NCOA) tools provided by the U.S. Postal Service are a useful means to ensure player database accuracy. Banks provide current currency exchange rates, many of them online. Casinos must have policies on data retention that govern the processes for purging, many of which are subject to outside regulation and oversight, as well as processes for data cleansing to periodically update data for all systems.

The third helpful step to ensure player database accuracy and relevance is the creation of player access points to the database. Using the web or in-house kiosks to allow players to update their addresses, interests and other profile data serves two primary purposes: data accuracy and maximizing player time. Data accuracy is easy to understand because correct data is the foundation of

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quality data. Maximizing player time means that players don't have to wait in line to update an address or interest code — or to apply for credit or any other player services. Many of these tasks can be done via a website linked into the casino's player database or at a kiosk within the casino.

There can never be enough training, or so all my trainer friends tell me (and I believe them). The repetition of good training, not only to ensure that all team members know the proper way to enter data, but also to break bad habits, helps guarantee data accuracy. Each team member needs to understand the "why" of good data. Sometimes it helps to explain the cost of bad data — lost productivity, low customer satisfaction and higher hard costs like postage and inaccurate prices. In the end, all of this means lower profits for the casino. Essentially, the "how" of good data to casino team members, once they have been trained, is instilling the value of pride in their work. When team members are proud of what they do and rewarded for a job well done, they will continue to perform in the desired manner. Simple enough, right?

The shortcut cheat sheet to ensuring data matters is simple: automate data entry whenever possible; clean up and purge data often; let the players update their own data; and train your team members on how to do it right the first time.

And while I may not ever get my holiday cards out on Thanksgiving weekend (sorry, Mom), I'm fine with sending Happy New Year cards on time and with no returns.



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