

Around eight per cent of a charity's direct marketing budget can be wasted on incorrect names and addresses. With figures like these, Gary Flood finds there is no time like the present for the sector to spring clean its data



## A fresh start

In the next 60 minutes, according to business information provider Dun & Bradstreet, across the planet 240 business addresses will alter and 150 business telephone numbers will change or be disconnected. That adds up over a year to 20 per cent of all telephone numbers not being the same, an equivalent number of business addresses being modified, and 17 per cent of all company names changing.

In fact, on average 20 per cent of corporate data is incorrect, incomplete or inconsistent, according to IT analyst firm Butler Group. This is the reality in the rapidly moving world of data consistency, where any organisation with any size of database is likely to be suffering from the same problems.

Does it matter, though, if you have a few extra people in your membership roster or sometimes send mail not just to J, but also to John and Johnny Smith who your computer thinks support your cause? The answer is most definitely yes.

Firstly is the legal aspect: "Charities have a duty to keep data accurate under the 1998 Data Protection Act," says Robin Fisk, managing director of Fisk Brett. Beyond that, there are a number of issues to contend with.

The problem will manifest itself in wasted money, wasted opportunity and possible brand damage. Wasted postage on a 10,000-strong mailshot if just one per cent of the addresses are dodgy translates to 100 pointless bits of postage and printing. Missing out contacting valuable donors is plainly a massive missed chance. And being seen to send duplicated mail to the same

supporter will probably annoy them causing them to wonder if their donations are being used on bumpf, not on the causes they gave you their cash for.

And put simply, fixing this will save you money. One estimate – from managed services firm Associa – is that a mailshot of 20,000 items, at £1 per contact three times a year, could contain as many as 1,700 incorrect addresses. Removing them could save £5,000 a year on your £60,000 total outlay. This could be as much as £66,000 back on a 400,000 (£800,000) mailshot.

So what can be done about it? The answer is data cleansing. There are a number of data audit and data profiling tools on the market from suppliers such as Trillium, First Logic and Datanomic. These tools search through data for inconsistencies or empty fields. Beyond that, there are a range of data cleansing tools which will remove duplication, find errors and complete missing numbers or letters in many cases. A very useful tool is a system to validate addresses called QAS ([www.qas.com](http://www.qas.com)), while there are other solutions to choose from like the Bereavement Register ([www.the-bereavement-register.com](http://www.the-bereavement-register.com)).

Nothing in life is free, and there will obviously be a cost involved in sorting out your data. Mike Basketter, senior product manager at Associa estimates: "Expect a minimum upfront cost of £500 and then around 20p a record to match bereavements and, say, £10 per 1,000 records to de-duplicate." He stresses that this should be taken as a very rough benchmark.

So the good news is that there are

straightforward ways to clean your database, but alas, you're not out of the woods yet. The thing to do next is to make sure the problem doesn't re-occur by making at least the first step or two towards a customer relationship management (CRM) solution.

This was the path taken by the charity YHA (Youth Hostels Association). Its IT projects officer, Sharn Harrison, explains: "It's very important to us to maintain a professional image and have the best data we can on our members, so we have invested in a CRM system from Pivotal that helps us efficiently manage all our million membership records." Using this approach means the organisation, after cleaning up its database in the first place, has no need to do annual purges of its system as it's now kept to a much higher standard.

"Charities should be looking to CRM as a way to both avoid the data quality headache and also increase the value of its relationships with donors," adds Andes Loukianos, sales director of IT services firm Touchstone, which implemented the YHA system.

This is a thought echoed by John Tate, chair of CITRA, a body set up to advise charities on better use of ICT. "It's best to get better processes in that stop wonky data entering your system than continually fixing the database. Technology like data cleansers can be useful but it's also a people issue – you need to look at how to better deal with data as an organisation."

All in all it seems time you should give your database a good spring clean – or figure out ways to stop having to do so.