Scrub. Sort. Standardize.

Have you ever made a call to a major donor who had spoken to the Executive Director about a gift the previous week? Have you ever sent out an annual appeal and had a significant number of letters returned in the mail? Have you ever called on a prospect, asked about the person's spouse and learned he had passed away the year prior? If you have, you know the frustration of relying on a messy, out-of-date database.

In this day and age of speedy and reasonably priced technology, there's no excuse for nonprofits to ignore or procrastinate the important task of database clean ups.

Here are some basics:

Scrub. Did you know that the average person today will hold 11 jobs from ages 18 to 44? Make sure to update your donors' employment information, as well as their contact numbers. Purge duplicated data and delete inactive information. With so much information available online, this is not difficult to do—particularly for your major donors' list.

Sort. Segment your data, so you can run reports on high-potential supporters including volunteers, corporate supporters, etc. Make sure giving records are up to date and uniform. Ensure that all the values—tabs for information—have been entered for insider information such as interests, concerns, the last date a person was solicited for a gift, etc. That way, fundraisers will be less at risk of walking into awkward donor situations.

Standardize. Do you have database policies in place? Are there standards established for data entry? For example, if one person enters GA and another enters Ga.—or US versus U.S. versus USA—it will make sorting and running clean reports nearly impossible.

Often, when trying to establish standards for database entry and clean up, organizations will get stuck. Those at the top won't have the time required to make a million decisions, but they may hesitate to delegate the task of decision-making. Because of this, it never gets done. One tip is to understand there's no perfect standard for data entry other than consistency. Once you realize the endgame is consistency, it's easier to delegate this task and achieve the goal: a clean, updated and uniform database.

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