

# Overcoming Database Demons

BY ROBERT WEINER

Whether you have recently survived the selection and implementation of a new donor database or have been using your database for years, you need to confront hidden demons. The demons, which lurk in every organization and in every database, want to turn your data into a pile of unusable garbage. To fight the demons, you need to plan for the ongoing health of your data through oversight, policies, procedures, training and vigilance.

## Where do you start?

### 1. Someone needs to be in charge of the database.

That could be a database manager, CRM administrator, gift processing director, development associate or office manager. The title does not matter; the role does. Think of this person as the database's owner. (This term will be used throughout the article). This does not necessarily need to be a technical role, such as a database administrator or IT director. The focus should be on training, user support, data management and data quality. At a small organization, this may be a small part of someone's job. At a large organization, this person may manage a big department. The bottom line? If no one is in charge of your data, the demons have already won.

### 2. The database owner needs to work with colleagues to develop data entry policies and procedures and train everyone who enters data.

For example:

- Which titles and abbreviations are acceptable?
- Who should have the ability to see, enter and delete which types of data?
- Where and how will you store data that do not fit naturally? For instance, depending upon your database, this could include photos, URLs, Twitter handles, seasonal addresses or links to proposals and gift agreements. If you do not have

rules about these things, the data will be stored in multiple formats and places, and over time, they will become impossible to retrieve consistently.

- Assuming your database provides multiple ways of entering data, how will you handle couples? Will they be tracked in a single household record or in separate, linked records?
- What if they are involved with or donate to your organization separately (e.g., one is a board member and one is a volunteer)?
- If you use separate records, how will you track their combined giving?

### 3. Make sure that everyone who can update your data has been trained on your policies and procedures.

In addition, staff and volunteers who cannot update data should know where to send updates.

### 4. Run your database on a need-to-know basis.

Give staff and volunteers access to only the data they need to see or change to do their jobs, but make sure that they do have access to the data they need.



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**5. Ensure your database has enough security options—and use them.**

- You should be able to provide read-only access.
- You may want to have the ability to provide read-only access to just a portion of your data, such as names and addresses but not gifts.
- You should be able to allow staff to update only certain portions of your data, such as updating addresses but not entering gifts.
- You should be able to restrict access to such functions as committing a gift batch, modifying posted donations or importing donations.
- You should absolutely be able to restrict the ability to globally update data or delete records.

**6. The database owner must monitor data integrity.**

He or she should routinely run reports to look for common errors:

- In most cases, names and addresses should not be lowercase (although some lowercase names are valid).
- Names and addresses should not be all uppercase.
- People with blank or invalid addresses should not be mailable.
- Dead people should not be mailable.
- Gifts and payments (as opposed to pledges or expected payments) should not have dates in the future.
- Dead people should not have open pledges (unless the pledges are attached to estate records).
- In most cases, dead people should not be assigned to a solicitor.
- The pledge status on fully paid pledges should not show as “active.”
- At least in the United States, a record should have only one spouse relationship.
- If the relationship field on a linked record shows “married,” the spouse’s record also should show “married.”
- If you use a separate email system, the database owner will need to develop a method for keeping updates, bad emails and unsubscribe requests in sync.
- The database owner should routinely run a report to identify duplicate records, which then should be merged.

**7. The database owner should identify staff members who repeatedly make errors and provide additional training.** If the errors continue, the organization must be willing to take away that person’s data entry permissions.

**8. The database owner should send your data out for updates on a regular schedule.** At a minimum, if you send postal mail in the United States, you are required to run your data through the National Change of Address (NCOA) system quarterly. You also may want to purchase additional address updates, as well as updates for phone numbers, email addresses, deceased people, employment and ages.

**9. If you use a mailing house, they may be running NCOA updates on your behalf.** Unfortunately, they may not be sending you those updates, or you may not be importing them into your database. If so, you could be paying for updates on the same people at every mailing. Finally, if the change of address data gets too old and is removed from the NCOA database, people will become unmailable.


- When you import NCOA updates, do not overwrite the current address. NCOA is not always right, and you risk losing good addresses. Some databases can archive the old address for you automatically.

**10. If you work for a large organization, think through the pros and cons of decentralizing data entry.** It is much easier to train a single person or department and monitor their work. However, centralizing data entry can create a bottleneck and discourage broad ownership of the data. Decentralizing data entry can give departments more control and get data into the database faster, but it requires ongoing training and monitoring of data quality.

**11. Make sure you run backups religiously and test them periodically to make sure you can recover data.** Follow the “3-2-1” rule for backing up any critical data: Keep three copies of important files, use two different types of media to back up the files and store one copy of the files off-site.

**12. Do all you can to prevent staff from downloading sensitive data—Social Security numbers, credit card data, etc.—to laptops or memory sticks.** Use encryption on your laptops and memory sticks. Tools such as Identity Finder, SENF, OpenDLP and Spider can scan your computers for sensitive data.

**13. Require strong passwords.** Do not share passwords. Do not allow staff or volunteers to share accounts. Change passwords regularly. When staff or volunteers leave your organization, be sure to disable their ability to login to your network and database.

**14. Finally, remember that while Excel is great for adding up numbers, it is not a substitute for a donor database.** In fact, Excel may be one of the leading causes of bad donor data. It is difficult to enforce data entry standards in Excel (such as allowing only legal U.S. state codes), and anyone who can update your spreadsheet can see and delete anything. 

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**Resources**

The Association of Advancement Services Professionals (AASP)  
**www.advserv.org**

AASP's Listserve, FundSvcS  
**http://fundsvcs.org**

Online queries such as those listed below will yield sample manuals and policies. Narrow the results by including the name of your database in the search.

- data entry manual site:.org
- data entry manual site:.edu
- gift entry manual site:.edu
- gift entry manual site:.org

Identity Finder  
**www.identityfinder.com**

SENF  
**http://utiso.github.io/senf**

OpenDLP  
**https://code.google.com/p/opendlp**



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