

Looking for Databases in All the Right Places

by Robert Weiner

Editors' Note: This special supplement on fundraising software services is the second in a series. Many thanks to Robert Weiner for his help in putting this package together.

et's suppose you need to buy a new car. How do you go about it? First, you have to decide who gets to pick (your 16-yearold son, your spouse, or the whole ■ family). Next, you might start thinking about what kind of car you want: a sedan, racy 2seater, minivan, or truck. Then you think about the features you want: two doors or four, manual or automatic transmission, air conditioning, paint color, and the number of cup holders. At

some point you decide how much you can spend. You might read Consumer Reports or ask friends how they like their cars. Finally, you're ready to go for test drives and compare prices.

Buying a donor database is a similar process. First, you need to know whether you're looking for the equivalent of a Vespa scooter, a Bentley, or something in-between. You need to know who will be involved in the decision and what they're looking for. You need to identify systems that

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might meet your needs and take them for test drives. What's critical is to not wind up with a moped if you need a minivan.

Step 1: What Do You Need?

The price of a donor database is largely determined by the sophistication of the fundraising it will support, the features and flexibility of the system, the number of donors it can track, and the number of people who will use it. As your needs grow, so does the cost of a database.

There are no hard-and-fast rules, however. This is where the car analogy starts to break down (pun intended). Some free systems might support only one user but offer the equivalent of power windows and door locks. Some vendors, such as Third Sector Systems and Telosa, sell strippeddown versions of their full systems, which can be upgraded later. These products include many of the features of the full products, but with limitations on the number of users, records, relationships, or other features. And some expensive systems, such as Raiser's Edge, are sold in modules, so you can start small and grow.

In general, most basic databases will allow a limited number of users to manage up to a few thousand constituent records, and track who lives where and what they gave. They offer the equivalent of an engine and two doors. If that's all you need to do, you can probably use a free or inexpensive system. If you need to do more, however, you're probably going to have to spend more. It's just like when you're shopping for a car: your "needs" often expand as you look at better models.

Below are some broad issues that will determine the price of a database:

How many people will use the system? Some systems limit the number of simultaneous users, sometimes to a single login. Others charge more as you add users.

How many constituents do you need to track? Some systems, such as eTapestry, are free for fewer than 500 records. Many systems are priced based on the number of records you store.

Who will provide technical support for the database and the people using it? If you don't have reliable technical support on staff, look for an intuitive, easy-to-manage system, or

consider an online Application Service Provider (ASP) that will manage the database for you.

What are you tracking? Sophisticated major gifts, membership, or proposal tracking usually requires a sophisticated and expensive system. Do you want to track relationships between records (e.g., employer/employee, husband/wife, individual/family foundation, business owner/corporation, or parent company/subsidiary)? Many inexpensive systems either cannot record relationships, or limit the number and type of relationships you can track.

What kind of security do you need? Some inexpensive systems have only two security levels: no access versus the ability to see and change everything. Others provide read-only access as a third level. More expensive systems will allow staff or volunteers to change addresses but not enter gifts; or the system might restrict access to gifts from VIPs.

Do you receive a lot of matching gifts? In general, the most an inexpensive database will do is record that a gift will be matched. More sophisticated systems can track the ratio at which specific companies match, alert you when a donor neglects to send a matching gift form, and record an expected matching gift on the employer's record.

Complicated gifts generally require expensive databases. For instance, if you need to track "recognition credit" (sometimes called "soft credit"), you may need a pricier database. These are gifts where one donor writes the check and gets the tax credit, but someone else (perhaps several others) should receive acknowledgement letters, be listed in the honor roll, get invited to donor events, etc. Examples include gifts given through family foundations, gifts promised by an individual but written on a corporate check, or gifts made through Donor Advised Funds such as the Fidelity Charitable Gift Fund.

Many small nonprofits do not solicit pledges. Tracking pledges can push you to an expensive system. You may need a system that can create a pledge schedule, modify it when the donor changes her mind, issue pledge reminders, and write off uncollectible pledges.

What do you need the database to tell you?

Some inexpensive systems do not allow you to develop custom reports, although they might allow you to export data to a spreadsheet. More sophisticated systems should allow you to analyze trends, such as upgrades and downgrades, renewal rates, or responses to a specific appeal as compared to the previous year.

One important area to consider is your honor roll—the annual list of donors giving at various levels. Some nonprofits use a complicated set of criteria to determine giving levels, including soft credits and the currentyear value of multi-year pledges. If your honor roll criteria are complex, you should look for a sophisticated database.

Do you need to exchange data with other databases, such as a box office, online giving, or your Web site? Some databases have very limited import and export capabilities; very few will allow you to exchange data continuously (in "real time").

Once you've sketched in the broad strokes of what you're looking for, you need to get down to details. Focus on high-priority needs that will distinguish one database from another. Examples might include prospect and proposal tracking, reporting needs (such as the ability to customize a thank-you letter based on a donor's giving history), pledge management (such as automatically calculating a pledge payment schedule), recording gifts in multiple currencies, or tracking membership upgrades.

Step 2: What's Important?

Next, you need to decide which features are mandatory. Be careful about this; when you designate a requirement as mandatory you are saying that if a vendor cannot meet even that one need, you would not use his or her system—even if it were free.

Once you know what's mandatory, everything else is "nice to have." However, some wishlist items are more important than others, so you need to prioritize. Since every system you look at should meet your mandatory requirements, the nice-to-haves will be the deciding factors.

Be sure to collect requirements and priorities from everyone who will need to get data into or out of the database. If you work in a small non-



profit, that might be one person. In larger organizations, you might have to consult with several departments, including Development, Membership, Corporate and Foundation Relations, Planned Giving, Accounting, and Information Technology. Each stakeholder should weigh in on desired and required features. That doesn't mean you need to talk to every person in the organization; instead, ask each area to appoint a representative. This person should also participate in software demonstrations, rate products, and check references.

Step 3: Who Will Manage the System?

Be realistic about the amount of technical support you will have. If the answer is "little to none," you should not choose a system that will require fulltime, on-site technical support. You probably also want a system that end-users can understand with minimal training, and one that comes with most of the reports you're going to need. Finally, you should consider how much technical support you will need from the vendor or a consultant, and whether you can find and afford it.

Step 4: What's Your Budget?

You need to have at least a rough idea of what you can spend. The price range for donor databases stretches from free to something resembling infinity. You will need to start with a ballpark budget, which you'll refine as the project progresses (see Step 8 for additional considerations).

As a starting point, think about 0.25% to 0.5% of your annual operating budget. Smaller organizations usually spend closer to the high end of that range. Economies of scale will often allow larger organizations to spend at the lower end.

Step 5: What Systems Will You Look At?

You know what you're looking for and what's most important. Now you need to find vendors

infinity.

who can do what you want at a price you can afford, as well as those whose technology you can support. One approach is to ask other organizations what they're using and whether they like it. You can also turn to the Internet—there are many discussion lists where nonprofit staff discuss fundraising software—a few are listed at the end of this article. Be sure to ask specific questions about how well the system addresses the issues at the top of your list. And be sure you're talking to comparable organizations; there's no sense in a three-person nonprofit talking to the national headquarters of the Red Cross.

Step 6: To RFP or Not to RFP

An RFP (Request for Proposals) is a document asking vendors whether they can meet your needs, and at what price. Many public agencies and large charities are required to use them. For the rest, it's optional.

The purpose of an RFP is to determine which vendors should demonstrate their software. The difficulty lies in writing questions for the RFP that will yield unambiguous answers and allow you to narrow the vendor pool. Start by describing your

organization and the problems you are trying to solve. Then focus on a handful of mandatory and high-priority requirements that will allow you to compare vendors. Good questions: Can your system accept donations in euros? Can it print receipts in Cyrillic? Bad question: Can your database produce a tax receipt? (Every donor database can do this, so you won't learn anything useful from this question. A better question assuming you need to do this-might be "Can your database personalize receipts based on a donor's gift amount and giving history?")

Try to keep your RFP short. Focus on questions that will truly distinguish one vendor from another. Have the same team that determined your requirements review the RFP before you send it, and then rate the responses. Remember, if your RFP is 30 pages, the responses will be several times as long, and you'll have to read and rate every one.

Step 7: Comparing Kumquats to Kumquats

The real trick in selecting a database is to compare one system to another. If you were

Table 1

Functions and Features That Help Determine Price

Ability to configure system for individual user's needs

Advocacy—ability to track advocacy volunteers

Analytical tools

Broadcast e-mail

Custom reporting

Ease of use

Events Management

Flexible security levels

Gift processing

Grantmaking

Interfaces with external systems (accounting,

box office, online donations, etc)

Major gifts support

Prospect/Moves Management—For more information on this see www.aprahome.org/pdfs/

creatinganidealenvironment.pdf.

Membership management

Online donations

Planned Giving

Pledge management

Proposal tracking

Prospect Research support

Recognition/Honor Roll tracking

Relationship tracking/linking records

Remote Access (e.g., Web or dial-up)

Ability to segment and personalize appeals and letters

Soft crediting—See "complicated gifts" bullet above

under Step 1, for a further explanation.

Stewardship—tracking donor and fund steward-

ship activities

Ticket sales

Ticklers

Volunteer management

buying a car, it would be obvious as to which models have four doors and power windows. With databases, most of the features might not be visible. During your test drive, you need to not only kick the tires, you need to understand what's under the hood.

You do this by telling each vendor what you need to see in order to make a decision. The level of detail you ask for will largely depend on the price of the database. Vendors of higher-end systems will usually send a sales representative to your office for a live demonstration, which can last a full day (or more at a big organization). Vendors of less-expensive systems usually conduct demos via the Web, lasting an hour or two.

In a full-day, on-site demo you have time to get very specific about not only what the vendor should demonstrate, but how he or she should demonstrate it, e.g., add these types of constituents, enter gifts to these funds, and then show me reports that look like this. In a shorter demo you won't have time for that level of detail. Nonetheless, you can still tell the vendors what you want to see, such as gift entry, prospect management, membership tracking, security, and modifying a standard report.

Regardless of how long your demo lasts, it's critical that you ask each vendor to demonstrate the same features in addition to providing an overview of the system. At the end of each demo (while it's fresh in their minds), have each participant rate the system. How well did the database handle each area of concern? For instance, on a scale of one to ten, rate gift entry, prospect management, membership tracking, reporting, and security. Also, try to get a demo copy of the software so you can continue the test drive on your own.

There's no law saying you only get one demo per vendor. You might decide you need a second round, or a series of conference calls. You might also go through short demos with half a dozen vendors before inviting a few to do full demos. However, be careful not to burn out your staff. By the third demo most people have lost track of who said what (which is why written ratings are so important).

Step 8: How Much Is That Database in the Window?

Make sure you understand all of the costs involved in a purchase. (See tables 1-3 for some Table 2

Price Variables

Number of simultaneous users

Number of records

Number of modules

(e.g., add-ins for different functionality)

Number of servers

(e.g., production, test, training, Web, printing, data ware-

house)

of the variables affecting price). The price of the software is just one aspect, and often the smallest part, of the "total cost of ownership." You might need to replace your server, desktop computers, printers, and forms. You might need help converting to the software, developing special interfaces, or writing custom reports. You might need to invest in additional training or add new staff. And you will definitely need to pay for annual software maintenance—usually about 25% of the software's retail purchase price. (If you can't afford the maintenance, you should not buy the software.)

If you didn't get a written price quote from an RFP, you need to do that now. You should be aware that, while some vendors have very simple price structures, others will need a lot of information from you. They might ask how many users and records you have, which modules you want, and how many servers you will run the software on. (Some large systems run best with separate processing, reporting, and Web servers. You should also have an additional copy of the database for training and testing.)

Step 9: Do Your Homework

So the sales people told you that their database will do everything, including washing your car. It's time to find out how clean the car will be. Just like when you're hiring staff, you need to check references. Talk to organizations with comparable fundraising operations and staffing, gift income, database sizes, and technical support. It's good to talk to similar types of nonprofits, particularly if you have questions that only a peer institution can answer (such as a theater's need to integrate with the box office), but feel free to cast a wider net.

to ask: How you bave all really belpful?

$Table \ 3$

New forms

Costs to Consider in Addition to Software Purchase

Data conversion
Training
Assistance with configuration, business rules,
process improvement
Creating custom reports
Developing interfaces to other systems
Upgrading computer, printer, and network hardware
Additional software (report writers, operating
system upgrades, office productivity tools)

Divide up your questions and have staff talk to their counterparts at each organization: technical staff call techies, fundraisers call fundraisers, etc. Some questions to ask: How long did it take you to "go live" on the software? Do you have all the reports you need? How long does it take a new staff member to become comfortable with the database? Is the online help really helpful? Do your fundraisers run their own reports? Were you happy with the vendor's support during the conversion? What would you do differently if you had it to do over?

It is important to distinguish software and vendor problems from problems caused by the client, however. The organization might have implemented the software incorrectly, failed to offer adequate training or support, or have purchased the wrong software to begin with. You need to talk to several references so you can discern patterns.

Remember, there is no perfect database. But there might be one that is perfect for you.

Articles:

Batchelder, Duff. TechSoup. Evaluating & Selecting Fundraising Software: www.techsoup.org/articlepage.cfm?ArticleId=182

Battin, Tom. TechSoup. Should Nonprofit Agencies Build or Buy a Database? www.techsoup.org/ articlepage.cfm?ArticleId=377&cg=searchterms&sg= custom%20database

The Grantsmanship Center: A User's Guide to Selecting Fundraising Software: www.tgci.com/magazine/02summer/soft1.asp

Mills-Groninger, Tim. NonProfit Times: "Build, Buy, or Rent?" www.nptimes.com/May01/sr.htm

Weiner, Robert. CASE Handbook of Institutional Advancement: Buying and Implementing a Development System (requires Acrobat Reader): www.rlweiner.com/case_handbook_chapter.pdf Weiner, Robert. NTEN Forecast: Why Building Your Own Database Should Be Your Last Resort:

Own Database Should Be Your Last Resort: http://nten.typepad.com/forecast/2003/10/why_build-ing_yo.html

Discussion Lists:

CharitySoft: A discussion list covering software, the Internet, and charities, operated by CharityChannel; membership fee requested. Sign up at http://charitychannel.com/Forums/CharitySoft.htm

FUNDSVCS: A discussion list for Development Services professionals: the people who process the gifts and manage the databases, operated by the Council for the Advancement and Support of Education. Sign up at http://hermes.case.org/archives/fundsvcs.html TechSoup's Technology for Fundraising message board: www.techsoup.org/forums/index.cfm ?fuseaction=list&forum=2022&cid=117

A discussion board covering all aspects of using information technology to support fundraising.

About the Author

Robert Weiner is the president of Robert L. Weiner Consulting, a firm that specializes in helping fundraisers make informed, strategic decisions about the selection, use, and management of information technology. He also hosts TechSoup's Technology for Fundraising message board. The Resources page of his Web site, www.rlweiner.com/resources.html, includes links to the above articles, database vendor listings, and articles on online fundraising, e-mail marketing, and technology planning.

Let's Talk

Let's move this topic forward! Any ideas or arguments you'd like to share with the authors and editors? Contact us at: feedback@nonprofitquarterly.org.

Fundraising Software and Services Directory 2004

Listed below are 40 vendors that sell—or in some cases give away—fundraising management software and services. Information is obtained directly from the vendor.

Access International (Enterprise)

The ENTERPRISE Fund-Raising & CRM System supports all aspects of a sophisticated development office including membership, annual fund, capital campaigns, direct marketing, major gift cultivation, planned gift management, email marketing and much more. ACCESS International has over 25 years of experience providing our fundraising system and business practice consulting to some of the most sophisticated non-profits in the industry. With ENTERPRISE you can ensure you are embracing the ideas of today, while maintaining your commitment to best practices in areas that are the backbone of your organization. Please call to learn more. Access International, 432 Columbia St., Ste. B05 Cambridge, MA 02141-1041; (617) 494-0066, sales@accint.com, www.accint.com/public_html/ solution/ent.htm

Advanced Solutions International (iMIS) 901 N Pitt St., Ste. 200, Alexandria, VA 22314; (800) 727-8682, www.advsol.com

Araize (FastFund) 130 Iowa Ln., Ste 102, Cary, NC 27511; (800) 745-4037, www.araize.com/fFR.htm

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Brickmill Marketing Services

For nonprofit organizations with narrowly-focused fundraising systems that add layers of expensive complexity, Brickmill developed Prospe \hat{X}^{TM} a cost effective, robust, and customizable donor management solution that provides a 360° view of your donors and personalized donor interactions. ProspeX is cost-effective because it stores all interactions within a single solution. Built upon marketplace standards, ProspeX manages and analyzes all on and off line channels resulting in more profitable campaigns, less complicated infrastructure and

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Command Systems, Inc. (FinDev10) 802 South Main Street, Columbia, TN 38401; (931) 388-9821, www.command-systems.com/FinDev.html

Crescendo Interactive (Crescendo Pro) 110 Camino Ruiz, Camarillo, CA 93012; (800) 858-9154, www.crescendointeractive.com

Donor Strategies, Inc. (MissionAssist) 8807 Montgomery Ave, Chevy Chase, MD 20815-4705; (888) 722-2033, www.donorstrategies.com

EASeONLINE

5544 Fair Ln, Cincinnati, OH 45227-3402; (513) 271-7344, www.eas-e-online.com

eFundraise.org

P.O. Box 10, Orefield, PA 18069; (800) 696-9049, www.efundraise.org

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Executive Data Systems Software

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Fund for the City of New York (Metrix) 121 6th Avenue, New York, NY 10013-1590; http://metrix.fcny.org/index.html

Fundraiser Software

PO Box 901, West Plains, MO 65775-0901; (800) 880-3454, fax (417) 256-6370, mail@FundRaiserSoftware.com, www fundraisersoftware com

Groundspring.org (ebase)

38 S. Last Chance Gulch #2A, Helena, MT 59601; www.ebase.org

Heritage Designs, LLC (MatchMaker 2000) 5125 N 16th St., Ste. C134, Phoenix AZ 85016; (800) 752-3100, www.matchmaker2000.com

K2 Solutions, LLC.

110 Pennsylvania Ave., Oreland Pa. 19075; www.donationsolution.com/DS/index.aspx

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Metafile Information Systems, Inc. (Resultsplus!) 2900 43rd St NW, Rochester, MN 55901-5895; (800) 638-2445, http://rp.metafile.com/

Microsoft (Charitable Contributions) www.microsoft.com

Npower (Devolio)

1080 W Ewing Pl., Seattle, WA 98119; (206) 286-8880, www.npowerseattle.org/tools/donormanagement.htm

Organizers' Collaborative (Organizers Database) PO Box 400897, Cambridge, MA 02140; http://organizenow.net/odb/odb.php

PG Calc, Inc. (PG Calc)

129 Mount Auburn St., Cambridge, MA 02138; $(888)\ 497\text{-}4970, www.pgcalc.com$

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Softrek Corp. (PledgeMaker) 30 Bryant Woods North, Amherst, NY 14228-3601; (800) 442-9211, www.pledgemaker.com

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Summit Software Corp. (Easy Gift) (302) 454-0839, www.summit-ware.com

SunGard BSR Inc. (Advance) 1000 Winter St., Ste. 1200, Waltham, MA 02451; (781) 890-2105, fax (781) 890-4099, info@sungardbsr.com, www.bsr.com

Systems Support Services (Donor2) 8848 B Red Oak Blvd., Charlotte, NC 28217; (800) 548-6708, www.donor2.com

Target Software (Team Approach) $1030\,\mathrm{Massachusetts}$ Ave., Cambridge, MA 02138; (617) 876-2275, www.targetsite.com

Telosa Software

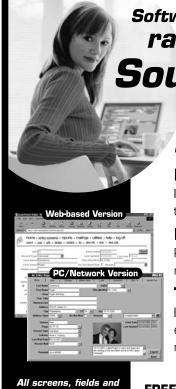
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Third Sector Systems (Mission Maestro) 438 US Rte. 2, Waterbury, VT 05676; (802) 560-0555, www2.thirdsectorsystems.com

3rdSector.net (Fund-A-Mental) (317) 513-9085, info@3rdsector.net, www.3rdsector.net/information8.html

Willow Mountain Consulting (The Giving Database) 4541 NE 14th Pl Portland OR 97211: (503) 281-0236, www.willowmountain.com

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