



MERCURY

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A CONSOLIDATED GRAPHICS COMPANY

GUIDELINES FOR VARIABLE DATA PRINTING

Preparing Database Files for Variable Data Printing

The data file that you will use for variable data printing (VDP) is critical to the success of your project. Your database might be anything from a simple mailing list to a full-blown personalized mailing or flyer. The old adage that you can never have too much information is definitely applicable here. Data can always be omitted, but is very hard to remanufacture.

Acceptable formats are (in order of preference) Excel spreadsheets, comma separated (.CSV) files, Dbase (.dbf), FilemakerPro, and fixed-length text files.

In a mailing file, the minimum required fields are:

Name, address, city, state and zip code. These must each be in a separate field. The data can (and is preferred to be) further subdivided into fields such as:

Salutation, First Name, Middle Initial, Last Name, Suffix, Company Name, Contact Name, Suite, Street Address, City, State, Zip, Telephone, etc.

These separated fields can always be put together in a VDP piece, but are extremely difficult to break apart if they are all lumped together in one field.

Design for variable-data printing is the same as any other good design, but the variable elements must be carefully planned and constructed. To prevent your mailing from looking like an afterthought, pay attention to good typography and quality images. Changing photos, backgrounds and graphics can make a mailer much more effective and intriguing than “boilerplate” text changes alone.

Preparing Design Documents for Variable Data Printing

The preferred way to submit a document is pictured below. In this example, the fields that are going to be variable are colored "Variable." This color is defined in the document's color palette (in this case, Adobe InDesign) and applied to any element that is to be variable. In this way, it makes it very easy to see what is to swap out.

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Engine
and/or Replacement Costs*

Turbo Charger \$1,719
Starter \$1,011
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*Repair and/or replacement cost estimates based on administrator's internal data in adjusting claims and the most current OEM replacement costs. Examples of average repair and/or replacement cost calculated in U.S.dollars.

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VPDM (6/06)

In this particular piece, the last name of the person the card is mailed to is also printed on the back of the boat. The items shown in green in the address area are generated by postal processing software that we use to obtain the best postage rates possible for the mailing.

Preparing photos for variable-image printing is best done if every replaceable image has exactly the same resolution and proportions as its counterparts. This facilitates the process of printing, and saves time when producing your final project. Triple-check your images to ensure that they are all in the same color space (we have found that CMYK TIFF images cause less trouble on most systems). This will prevent slow-downs and failures in production.

ZIP It Into the Mail

The Postal Service will discount postage if your mail is ZIP-sorted. They offer deeper discounts if you do detailed sorting. USPS consultants who can help you execute this sorting process are available in regional offices. Adding the PostNet code to the bottom of the addressee panel also results in a postage reduction (PostNet is the little picket fence below the address on most mail as shown in Figure 1. It has the recipient's ZIP+4 code and a "checksum" digit in it).



Figure 1: Using the PostNet code can net you a postage reduction.

These procedures are all available to you when producing any variable data mail piece. We utilize CASS certified postal processing software to process your databases. If desired, the records that do not meet criteria established by the USPS for cost-efficient mail can be returned to you for further investigation and/or cleansing. The software can also examine your data to find duplicate entries and avoid sending an identical mail piece to the same client.

Marketing Tips for VDP Campaigns

When you employ direct marketing communications that are individually customized for each customer and prospect, you can generate a much higher ROI than by more traditional methods. We offer the following tips on how to approach and implement a successful program using one-to-one direct marketing.

1.) Determine your goals of your marketing campaign:

- Reduce response rate costs
- Reduce turnaround time
- Generate more leads and traffic
- Improve retention rates
- Maintain and extend customer relationships
- Generate more sales

2.) Choose your audience carefully and target them with a program that makes sense.

To start with, have a good database. The more you understand about your target audience the better you can communicate with them. Demographic data can help you market to each individual with messaging that is timely and relevant to their life stage.

By understanding your customers you will have a program that fits them based on what services and products they will buy. For example, a company promoting a \$12.99 car wash service is not likely to pay a premium for a complex one-to-one direct marketing program. But a car dealership that is selling new cars to past customers can certainly benefit from more personalized marketing. By increasing response rates for high dollar items, the return on marketing investment can be measurably improved.

3.) Create an effective layout and design.

Have an attention-grabber. Using color and having a themed graphic based on information you know about the reader can make the difference by increasing response rates. If you are selling Buicks and your reader plays golf (according to your demographic data), incorporate a golf theme as one of your variable images. Placement is also very important. For example, with a direct mail piece, the envelope is what the reader sees first. This is where your piece has to be noticeable so the recipient will open the mail piece.

Integrating different offers or discounts in the same campaign can generate valuable insights on what your target market is responding to. Utilizing unique offer codes is also a good tool in measuring results.

4.) Gather and measure your results.

Did your results meet your objectives? Are the people who responded to your campaign the people you thought would respond? What surprised you about your results? What can you learn from this campaign that can help you improve your next campaign?

You should refine your marketing strategy after every campaign and try to improve future results. It may sound obvious, but your business should target more people who respond with high-dollar purchases and spend less time and money pursuing targets that rarely respond with minimal purchases. Differentiating between these groups is called “segmentation”, and good databases can help you identify which segments are which in your target market.

Obviously this is just a brief guideline to a successful campaign. By planning ahead and setting goals you can determine if one-to-one direct marketing makes sense for you. If it does, and you invest the time and energy to build a smart campaign, you may experience direct marketing success like you never have before.

Contact us if you need more detailed guidance on variable data printing and one-to-one marketing.

VDP Checklist

Before submitting a file, check to see if you have fulfilled the following conditions.

1. Include a hardcopy proof clearly marking the variable fields, where they are to be placed and what formatting is to be applied to them.
2. Include your data file.
3. Verify that your data is in one of the accepted formats.
4. Verify that your data has **headers** and there are separate fields for every search possibility. (If you are targeting people within a specific age group, do you have an “age” field?)
5. If you have variable images, can each group of variable images be placed in the same size box at the same percentage? (If not, they will be scaled non-proportionately and will result in image distortion).
6. **State clearly if you want your data checked for duplicates.**
7. **State clearly if you wish the duplicate records and/or non-mailable records omitted from the printing and if you want the questionable data returned to you for further cleansing or verification.**
8. State what mail classification the piece is to be mailed (first class, standard, non-profit, etc.)
9. If we are using your mail permit, **is it up to date?** You will need to provide documentation regarding the date of issuance and contact information. When the presort is run, we will provide you the estimated postage costs so that you may deposit the proper funding to the account.