

How to Use Database Management to More Effectively Meet Continuing Education Needs

by

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To effectively use a database, a continuing educator must first collect appropriate data on seminar/ conference attendees. Basic data for the continuing engineering educator's database should include: (a) contact date/time, (b) contact person, (c) contact person's address (if different from attendee), (d) attendee prefix, (e) first name, middle initial, last name and suffix, (f) attendee title, (g) organization name, (h) mail stop/department, (i) city/state/zip, (j) telephone number, (k) fax number, (l) email address, and (m) name tag name. Additional data would include: (a) job function, (b) gender, (c) the names of respondents' immediate supervisors, or name and title of person authorizing attendance, (d) key code information to monitor effectiveness of individual mailings and mailing list, (e) standard industrial classification (SIC) number (if a business firm), (f) company size in terms of number of employees, (g) secondary email address, and (h) source of the registration (brochure, catalog, space ad, personal letter, etc.).

A continuing educator will use the database information in a number of different ways. First of all, confirmation forms and/or invoices will be sent to course registrants. Next, name tags, rosters, name tents, and certificates will be printed from the database. Third, an educator will use the database for future communications with the attendee.

After a course is over, an educator may send a thank-you letter to the participant or to his/her superior. Later on, an educator will use the database to do a needs assessment. Questionnaires will be sent to past attendees to find out other continuing education needs. Telephone surveys will be conducted to identify appropriate topics for programs. A participant's superior or boss will be questioned to find out the kinds of courses that should be developed and presented in the future.

Last, a continuing educator will use the database to promote future courses. Promotional literature or email may be sent to the past attendee or to his/her superior. Depending upon the targeted individual, appropriate appeals will be developed in promotional literature to encourage the recipient to participate in other upcoming continuing education courses.

While building a database, a continuing educator must also make sure that the database is properly maintained. First, an educator must keep the database unduplicated, i.e., an individual's name should appear only one time on the database. To ensure a clean list, an educator should only add the names of participants who are not already on the master file. If the individual has already taken a course in the past, his/her name will already be in the database. When this individual takes another course, his/her record should be updated with the appropriate course and other information.

Next, a continuing educator should take steps to remove the deadwood or obsolete names from the database. During any one year, many individuals retire and are no longer candidates for continuing education programs. At the same time, other individuals may have entered different careers and are no longer interested in receiving invitations to attend courses. Last, many individuals will no longer be working for the same organization, and as a result will have a new address.

To help remedy this problem, an educator should mail an audit brochure to everyone in the database once per year. Recipients of the audit brochure should be asked to return a self-addressed postage-paid card indicating their desire to stay in the database. Individuals who do not return the audit card will be removed from the database.

Also, a continuing educator should print an "address correction" statement on the mailing panel of the brochure and provide space for recipients to supply address changes to the educator. Once these update changes are received, an educator can change the address so that interested prospects can continue to receive invitations.

While developing and maintaining an internal database, a continuing educator should also use external databases to better serve the continuing engineering education needs of the targeted population. For example, an educator should send a calendar listing of all of the upcoming courses to the members of an appropriate engineering association. Members of the association who would like more information on any one or all of the courses would be asked to return a postage-paid reply card and then have their names added to the database.

An educator should use the same approach with subscribers to certain publications. Like the association member, the magazine/journal reader would be asked to indicate his/her course preference(s) on a reply card, which would be mailed to the continuing engineering education office. The interested prospect would be added to the internal database and would receive invitations on programs appropriate to his/her interest.

After having developed a comprehensive database, a continuing educator should make effective use of database information to better serve the continuing education audience. An educator should take a number of steps to achieve this objective. First, an educator should send at least two invitations to appropriate individuals in the database. Many times, a recipient will lose, mislay, or forget about his/her invitation to attend a continuing education course. A second invitation is a reminder that encourages the individual to consider attending the course. As a rule, the response rate from a second invitation is approximately 50% of the response rate from the first mailing. Usually, the second "hit" is sent to arrive two weeks after the first mailing arrived.

Next, an educator should give individuals on the database plenty of advanced notice concerning the presentation of a continuing education program. Typically, an educator will want to give at least three months notice to prospective participants on programs lasting two or more days. Programs of shorter duration require less advanced notification; however, most educators usually promote too late as opposed to too early. Travel distance, level of the program and the program location are some additional variables that an educator should consider when determining the notification date. Allowances should also be made for the length of time it takes the postal authorities to deliver the mail (typically two to four weeks for standard bulk mail in the U.S.). Alternatively, fax or email blast should be used as follow-up promotion.

Third, an educator should make sure that an appropriate amount of time and money is spent on promoting continuing education courses. Typically, an educator should expect to allocate around 20% of the total expected revenue to promotion. For example, if a course is expected to bring in 20,000 dollars in revenue, an educator should plan on spending approximately \$4,000 on promoting the course. The \$4,000 would be spent on retrieving and preparing database information for a marketing campaign.

Fourth, when possible, a continuing educator should send personalized invitations to appropriate individuals on the database. For example, a past attendee's boss should receive a special letter plus brochure invitation inviting him/her to send another participant to a repeat session of a previous course. As another alternative, an educator might write or fax a message to all of the previous attendees in an annual conference and invite these past participants to attend this year's annual meeting. As in the previous case, this personalized attention will help convince prospective attendees and their immediate superiors to attend scheduled courses.

Fifth, an educator should use recency analysis to build meeting attendance. By

completing a recency analysis, an educator can establish time classifications for past attendees based on when they last attended a program. By completing a recency profile on past attendees, an educator can make more accurate predictions about the likelihood of repeat attendance. For example, attendees who just recently attended a seminar that is part of an on-going series would be highly qualified prospects for attending additional courses.

Recency analysis could also be used to identify companies/organizations that support continuing engineering education and have sent participants to a seminar or conference within the last six months or a year. Given their recent support, individuals at these organizations would be most likely to participate in other continuing engineering education offerings.

In all these cases, an educator is using recency analysis to "market with a memory." In other words, research information from the database is used to capitalize on the relationship already established with the past attendee. This individualized marketing tends to build loyalty as individuals realize that you are taking the time to recommend seminars/conferences suited to their needs.

Last, a frequency analysis can be completed on the database to build enrollments. To complete a frequency analysis, an educator should plot the distribution of customers by the number of courses taken. The same type of analysis should be used to plot the distribution of companies by the number of courses supported. By completing this analysis, an educator can identify participants and companies that have taken or supported one, two, three, four, or more courses. As a rule, high frequency users/supporters are more likely to attend future courses than one-time users/supporters.

In addition to the analysis given above, a continuing engineering educator should use collected database information to answer several other questions. For example, an educator should analyze the geographical distribution of past attendees. Through a geographical analysis, an educator can target the most responsive geographical areas for sending invitations.

Educators should also use the database to analyze past attendees by size of organization. During the analysis, an educator would typically find that only certain size organizations will support a particular program. Once organizational size and course attendance have been correlated, an educator can focus invitations on clusters that have the highest probability of responding to a particular seminar/conference invitation.

An educator should also use the database to complete a "cancellation and no-shows" analysis. With information collected from this research, an educator can identify

those individuals/organizations that seem to consistently cancel their registrations or become "no-shows" by just failing to attend. Once identified, these individuals/organizations can be sent special reminder letters or be called on the phone to encourage participation and/or to confirm that they will attend.

A continuing educator should also establish a prospect or inquiry file in the database. Individuals who have inquired about a particular program or series of courses should receive a personalized letter plus invitation from the continuing engineering educator. Next, the educator may want to call the person who inquired to encourage him/her to attend a course. Many times, adult learners need this type of encouragement to participate in continuing education courses.

Last, a continuing educator should maintain a file of recommended names in the database, typically, an educator might ask attendees to recommend colleagues that might be interested in attending future courses. These recommended names would, in turn, receive, again, a special letter plus the brochure invitation from the continuing engineering educator. In the letter, the educator would mention the name of the person who recommended that the recipient receive an invitation to attend an upcoming program. This type of personalization, again, will help encourage reluctant individuals to attend.

In conclusion, an educator will find that databases will become increasingly important to the success of the continuing engineering education program. Back in the 1970s, educators found that mass marketing worked since attendees were usually content to accept seminars and conferences that met at least a few of their needs. Then the 1980s brought the computer revolution, and continuing educators began to segment markets so they could more accurately match educational needs and seminar/conference programs. In the 1990s, the trend continued toward niche marketing as educators grouped individuals having a commonality of interest into market niches and then develop customized programs around these shared needs. In the 2000s, continuing educators will have to continue these trends and place even more emphasis on "one-to-one marketing," on building long-term relationships with the participant, and on developing customized seminars and conferences for the learner. Databases are the vehicle for helping the continuing engineering educator achieve this goal.