

Eye on Technology: Should You Design Your Own Database?

BY RACHEL LEVINE

What Is a Database?

Whether you sell a product or service, you need to keep track of customers (or clients); what was ordered and when; what was paid; what is owed and when, and how to follow-up. These are the nuts and bolts of every business. But a well-designed database can do even more. The database can become a foundation for almost all of your marketing efforts. You can use the information within the database for direct marketing, tracking advertising and publicity, sales prospecting, market planning, and other key tasks.

The database can help you target very specific customers for your products and services and assist you in generating more profit. In short, databases store information and enable you to retrieve it in any way desired.

Choosing a Database: Ignore the Hype.

Choosing the right database is crucial. The wrong decision will cost you time and money. So, ignore all the marketing hype that says any database is "easy." They aren't. The very concepts behind them are abstract and often confusing.

What to Use

To track orders and payments, you should be using something like QuickBooks. To track leads, you should be employing something like ACT! Both of these are excellent databases designed to do a specific task. For your more individual needs, odds are software already exists also, so do an exhaustive search for that software:

- 1) Read software ads in your trade/business magazines.
- 2) Call a member of your trade/business association and ask what they use.

- 3) Ask anyone else you know who runs a similar business.
- 4) Search the Internet.

What If There Is No Available Software?

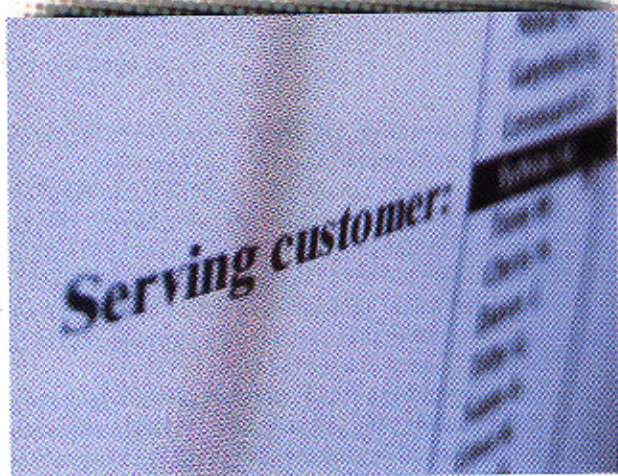
If no software exists for your type of business, you will have to buy a database program and design your own application. For small to medium-sized businesses, the databases most commonly used are Lotus Approach, Microsoft Access and FilemakerPro. Visual FoxPro and Visual dBASE are also good products but aren't used as widely.

Consider hiring a professional right from the start. Unlike Word or Excel, a database takes a much higher level of skill and the failure rate is high for beginners. The biggest "Gotcha!": the software won't prevent you from making a mistake. You can design a database that's all wrong and not know it. But, eventually, you will have an unusable mess on your hands and have to call in a professional anyway. Most likely this person will have to discard everything you did and start over.

Designing Your Own Database

If you are the database designer, keep in mind that your decision:

- Requires a high level of expertise and specialized training.
- Works if you can end up not having to become a full time database programmer.
- Can cause you to design one that is inefficient, fails to take advantage of relational design or the full power of the database or becomes time-intensive to use.
- Runs the risk of not being right – You may eventually have to pay someone to correct it. The costs involved could be more than the



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costs to have someone build it correctly the first time.

Should You Design Your Own Database?

Yes, IF you can check the following entries:

- You did an exhaustive software search for your kind of business and found nothing.
- You have the budget to hire a professional database designer.
- You have the time to work out the "specs."
- You can wait while the designer builds the database, tests it, and debugs it
- You can spend time testing the database thoroughly before actually relying on it.

OR

- You can't afford to hire a professional, but you do have the time, ability and willingness to design your database.
- You are prepared to spend a minimum of 150 hours learning.
- You are willing to invest the funds necessary to learn (books, classes, and tapes).
(Rough estimate: \$600, in addition to the cost of the software.)
- You're not in any hurry.
- You have a "Plan B" if it doesn't work out. 

Copyright © March 2000. Rachel Levine has been a database consultant, programmer and trainer for eleven years. With a background in education, writing, and business as well as technology, she brings a wealth of knowledge to every client, and believes the right technology will differ for every company...up to and including sticking with paper files. Rachel is available for needs assessment and listing help, custom programming if necessary, training, and speaking engagements. She can be reached at Cyberfento@Cyberfento.net.