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Harty

25 James St.

PO Box 324

New Haven, CT 06513

Phone: 203-562-5112

[Click here to email us](#)

Are You Making Use of Free Data?

Did you know that you can increase the precision of your marketing efforts for free? 1:1 personalization is all about data, and the smarter you use your data, the more effective your campaigns will be. But if you are paying someone to append your database or do the data mining for you, you will pay for every little increase in knowledge. These efforts can be highly valuable, but if there are steps you can take on your own, at no charge, why not take advantage of them?

A great place to start is the U.S. Census Bureau (www.census.gov). There, you can find a wealth of information on the demographics of individuals, families and businesses, by state, county and other locations, including ZIP code.

Want to know the percentage of high school graduates ages 25 and over in Benzie County, MI? How about the mean travel commute for workers ages 16 and over in Poughkeepsie, NY? The percentage of families with children under the age of five in Lancaster, PA? Or maybe you want to know the number of permits granted for new housing construction in Boise, ID. Women-owned businesses? Businesses owned by Native Hawaiian and other Pacific Islander-owned firms? It's all there.

What could you do with that information?

1. Better use of resources. If you are marketing to a specific target audience, this data will tell you the geographic locations where that audience is most concentrated. If you are marketing luxury items for the car (say, an automotive docking station for managing wireless devices), that "mileage to work" data might come in very handy. Why purchase data from counties with workers with very short commutes? Purchase only those lists that give you the most bang for your buck.

2. Personalize more effectively based on demographics. If you are marketing to a specific local area, understanding the demographic makeup of that location will enable you to target or personalize those documents more effectively. If you discover, for example, that very high percentages of your target population speak a language other than English in the home, why not segment your mailings by language or include language or culture as a variable in your 1:1 printing program? Or if you are targeting businesses, would you market differently if you knew that your target geography contained a high percentage of women-owned firms? Or if the sales per capita were unusually low?

For even more complex data mining, the U.S. Census provides a variety of data extraction and management tools, also for free. Its Census and Survey Processing System, for example, is a public-domain software package for entering, tabulating and mapping census and survey data. Its Extract Software is a general-purpose data display and extraction tool that works with Census Bureau CD-ROMs recorded in dBASE format.

What could you do with all of this information? Whatever you choose. It's free for the taking—bought and paid for by your tax dollars. So take advantage of it.

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