

Thoughts on the Selection, Care, and Feeding of Direct Marketing Geeks

By Jim Fulton, Principal, Customer Metrics, Inc.

These days, you can't swing a dead cat at a DMA chapter meeting without hitting at least three vendors touting the many wonders of their "CRM" package.

Call me a skeptic, but I think most experienced direct marketers recognize that a successful direct marketing enterprise needs good quantitative analysts. Or as I affectionately refer to them, geeks. True, the technology has progressed to the point where DMers no longer need to know JCL (if you don't know, don't ask), but no matter how powerful the vehicle, you still need a driver for it.

When you see "geek," you may instantly think of a programmer/analyst in IT. This is not the type of individual I am talking about (though many of the thoughts below would probably be equally applicable to that group). I am speaking of analysts who work in and report to marketing, whose primary task is to generate actionable business intelligence out of the company's database.

Having spent the better part of the last two decades being, managing or observing direct marketing analysts in their natural habitat, I have assembled a collection of thoughts about the breed: how to find a good one, and how to gently manage a good one into a key department and company resource.

Now I do not pretend that this list is derived scientifically, and would also invite any practitioner who disagrees with any of these points to rebut them. I'm sure everyone would learn something from the discussion. That said, here are my thoughts:

Selection

When trying to recruit a geek, or select among candidates, I would suggest ranking business interest above raw statistical horsepower or programming wizardry. The latter two can be learned more readily than business sense, and a good business sense will help drive the desire to acquire the appropriate technical skills. I would caution against hiring individuals with Ph.D.s in statistics (or those who might aspire to that), since in all likelihood their fetish for methodology would overwhelm the imperative of practicality.

In considering the most successful geeks I have encountered, the one personality trait that stands out is curiosity. To paraphrase Einstein's comment on imagination, curiosity is more important than knowledge. If you can see in an interview that the individual has a high degree of curiosity, has a solid programming background (SAS or SPSS) and some business sense, I'd say you have a winner.

(Note: another personality trait I have observed among great analysts is an intense sense of humor, sort of a blend of Dave Barry, Gary Larson, Scott Adams and Monty Python. While this is not by any means unique to geeks, the observed absence of a sense of humor may be something of a yellow flag).

The Cloister Question

Larger organizations with a multi-geek staff inevitably face a decision about whether or not to create an "analysis group" separate from a "direct marketing operations" or "direct marketing planning" function. I think there are legitimate points on either an integrated or a separated structure.

Organizationally, it may be necessary to create different groups, with different titles. In this case, I think that it would be prudent to maintain physical integration with the rest of the direct marketing organization. First, you want geeks to apply their talents to practical business problems, and I have too often seen detached "analysis groups" drift off into quasi-academic research with only a tangential relevance to real business questions.

Secondly, managerially or physically integrating the geeks offers the very real organizational benefit of teaching and sharpening the planning and operations staffs, which ideally results in a more accomplished, more coherent and happier department. A "grunts vs. geeks" split is avoided.

Finally, having worked with a number of smaller companies where a dedicated analysis group is not possible due to the scale of the business, I have observed that the geeks (more often, geek) in that environment seem much happier, motivated and focused than their counterparts operating in a detached group.

The Importance Of Playtime

While I believe geeks need to stay attached to real business questions and issues, it is equally true that they need "playtime" in the database. This is particularly true if you have successfully found a geek with a high degree of curiosity.

"Playtime" is project work or research that the geek has developed a personal interest in, and/or is not immediately related to the "label licking" functions of a direct marketing department. It may be related to a department function (for example, how do customers acquired from different classes of list rentals perform during their first twelve months on the file), or it may be something largely unrelated to direct marketing (how do the merchandise selections made by long-term customers differ from the selections made by new customers?)

Because they have such vast data access, and the ability to appropriately organize and analyze that data, their range of curiosities is virtually limitless.

As long as the curiosity has some business application (even if it isn't necessarily in this year's departmental objectives), I would strongly recommend giving them a fairly long leash, as long as the project doesn't degrade from accomplishing the essentials of the business. Curiosity will drive the individual to learn new programming techniques, or it may enable some exposure to or involvement in areas of the company outside the departmental blinders. These are all, as Martha Stewart would say, "good things."

Don't Let Ad Hoc Run Amok

Direct marketing managers inevitably use their geeks for a variety of ad hoc analyses – a question comes up in an executive meeting, and the quickest way to answer it is to ask a geek.

Done properly, these ad hoc questions can be useful and interesting; personally, I always enjoyed ad hoc questions because:

- a) It gave me something new to do
- b) It exposed me to someone else's curiosity (which can, incidentally, provide invaluable insight into how that someone else thinks) and
- c) It was usually a fairly quick effort, with immediate thanks and feedback.

For less experienced geeks, ad hoc questions are also a good training tool – the question being asked is usually (though not always) fairly specific, so the task is to translate that question into SPSS or SAS code, and generate an answer.

There is, however, something of a slippery slope on ad hoc queries: be careful that you're not leaning on a fairly expensive (and easily-bored) geek to do routine, repetitive reporting that would be more economically generated by your company's IT group. A former colleague, probably the most gifted geek I have ever worked with, spent a considerable amount of time generating regular reports on what percentage of orders are paid for in cash vs. check vs. credit card.

Good information to know? Certainly. But in this case, the geeks were being used as a patch because the company's internal systems were not designed to generate this information. These kinds of tasks – asked weekly or monthly or quarterly – can leave a geek feeling extremely frustrated and underutilized. Which can then result in the geek leaving.

Mentor

I cannot overemphasize the value of a good mentor. This can be the geek's immediate manager, but is more often a more senior executive (not necessarily one with responsibility for direct marketing), an experienced colleague or an outside consultant. I don't think "assigned mentors" are particularly realistic, since the right interpersonal chemistry is essential if the relationship is going to work. But make an effort to expose your geek to a variety of people who might make good mentors, and if and when the geek and the would-be mentor hit it off, make sure you help enable the relationship.

A mentor can teach the geek a variety of things: the interrelationship between corporate strategic issues and the work the geek does; the importance not only of technical ability, but the ability to communicate ideas and analyses to non-technical audiences.

A mentor can also challenge, and thus teach, the geek in a way that is oftentimes awkward for the geek's manager – the mentor, after all, isn't going to be giving a performance appraisal, and the challenge is thus seen in the context of education, not in the context of a reprimand or dissatisfaction.

Be Prepared to Teach

Everyone's time is under pressure: days and weeks fly by, and emails and voicemails demand constant attention. I would suggest that one of the key responsibilities of a manager is to teach your employees, and this is especially true with geeks. With luck, you've recruited someone with an above-average degree of curiosity. Moreover, I think it is essential that they understand not only the context of the work they're doing, but also what other issues are percolating around them.

For example, if you're getting pressure from senior management to explain changes in your customer acquisition economics, take an hour or two on a Friday afternoon to kick around ideas with your geek(s). Walk through the cost-per-new-customer equation, how the various components have been changing, why they've been changing. For one thing, the exercise might help clarify things in your mind. And the geek will at the very least learn something, and could potentially identify areas where he or she might be able to help you analyze some of these issues.

Be Prepared to Learn

If you've hired a good geek and given them a good environment, they will almost unavoidably start to discover things. Some of them might be fairly narrowly tactical and intuitively obvious (*"Did you realize that we don't successfully prospect with parkas in Texas?"*). Others might be quite significant strategically (*"Um, the only way you can rationalize our current customer acquisition investment is if your lifetime value model assumes all of our customers live for four hundred years"*). In either case, you should be prepared to learn what the geek is trying to teach.

There's an old saying that the only thing harder than getting a new idea into some people's minds is getting an old idea out. If and when your geek starts coming up with analyses or approaches that shake the conventional wisdom, be prepared for the possibility that the conventional wisdom might be wrong.

Honesty/Integrity

I never really considered this an issue, but après-Enron, it unfortunately merits mention. In hiring and managing a geek, the importance of honesty and integrity should be paramount. Honest mistakes are OK; making up analyses, because you realize the practical impossibility of anyone else auditing the analysis, is obviously not.

So those are my thoughts – I hope you have found them entertaining, if not enlightening. Comments or questions are welcome – jbfulton@aol.com.

Jim Fulton started his direct marketing career at Lands' End during the Reagan Administration. He left Lands' End in 1999 when he realized his diet didn't have enough airline food. The founder and principal of Customer Metrics, Inc., a database marketing, analysis and strategy consultancy, Jim visits Seattle frequently on business; he lives in Madison, Wisconsin.