

# Tips for Creating a Data Policies, Procedures and Style Manual



Managing your donor and constituent database is one of the most important aspects of nonprofit management. Data forms the foundation of fundraising and having clean, consistent, accurate and complete data will pay dividends by improving fundraising ROI, enabling the formation of authentic and long lasting relationships and stewarding gifts of time and resources appropriately.

In order to achieve the clean, consistent, accurate and complete data foundation you need for success, you will need to create a Data Policies, Procedures and Style Manual (Data Manual) to guide users of the database in data entry, use of the reporting and querying capabilities, data security, and periodic maintenance and auditing of the data.

This guide is intended to help you start your Data Policies, Procedures and Style Manual. You won't create an entire manual at one time. Rather, you create a framework, and as questions and exceptions arise, you can make appropriate decisions and document both the decision and the reasoning in your flexible and adaptable manual. Use the following questions to help you begin this important work.

## **What data will you collect and enter?**

List the types of information you are proactively collecting for your database, including contact information, biographic and demographic data, wealth intelligence including asset information and wealth indicators, transactions, roles and relationships, spouse and family, etc. It is also important to indicate the types of information you do not want to collect such as liabilities, legal actions, and personal information that is not relevant to the organizations relationship with the individual.

For each type of information you plan to collect, indicate the standard data entry rules that apply. For instance, will you follow standard postal protocol in the use of punctuation and abbreviations within addresses? What is your default salutation for constituents? What format will be used for dates and telephone numbers?

Your Data Manual should also document your organization's policy for issuing "soft credits" and "shared credits," the handling of matching funds, how payments are tracked by appeal and campaign, and how households are addressed (e.g., with the primary donor listed first or a default "head of household").

## **What codes will you use to make reporting and querying useful?**

List out any specific constituent codes you are using, such as Volunteer, Board Member – Current, Board Member – Former, Member, Subscriber, Parent, Friend, Patient, etc., and add new codes to the list as they become necessary. Other codes to be included are codes for funds, campaigns and appeals, payment types (e.g., cash, check, credit, stock) and gift clubs. Codes should be reviewed periodically to be sure they remain relevant and that too many codes aren't being created.



Having a well-structured yet flexible and adaptable coding structure for your data is one of the keys to making it useful and actionable. Your Data Manual should clearly define coding and include definitions for each.

#### **Who will have access to the database and the ability to enter or change data?**

Ideally, everyone who needs access to data for the performance of their job should have it. But those who do not need to access the database, or those who only need access to certain parts of it, should be restricted where possible. Likewise, those who need access do not necessarily need permission to make changes, and the more you are able to limit the number of people able to make changes, the more consistent and accurate your data entry is likely to be.

It is a good idea to audit data entry periodically to see if there are errors being made repeatedly and if that warrants further training, either for the team or specific individuals. It might also indicate the need for more clarity in your data manual.

#### **How will donor and constituent privacy be protected?**

It is important to put policies in place to protect the privacy of the individuals represented in your database, and to ensure the data is secure. WealthEngine recommends adopting the policies for privacy advocated by [APRA](#) in the [APRA Statement of Ethics](#) and by [AFP](#) in the [Donor Bill of Rights](#). In addition, we recommend that those who do have access to confidential and sensitive information within your organization's files sign a Confidentiality and Nondisclosure Agreement. [Review a sample agreement for fundraising volunteers.](#)

#### **How will your database be maintained?**

Your database will require some periodic maintenance including checking for duplicate records, compliance with postal regulations, including National Change of Address (NCOA) updates, and reviews of codes used in constituent segmentation, gift entry and campaign management. Procedures and timing for these maintenance items, as well as others, should be included in your Data Manual.

#### **How often will you back up the database and check backup procedures for functionality?**

Your database will ideally be backed up automatically on a nightly basis, but if you are a small shop, this may not be practical. Determine how often you will back up the database, recognizing that you could lose all the data you have entered since your last backup. If a loss were to occur, it would require that any data entry done since the last backup be recreated. In addition to regularly backing up your data, you must periodically check the entire backup and restoration process to be sure it works. Your organization's specific procedures and policies should be documented in your Data Manual.

#### **Who will assume ultimate responsibility for the database and the data it contains?**

Database administration and data entry quality should be tied to the goals of the organization and be included in job descriptions and annual reviews. The position or positions designated as having the responsibility for these functions should have performance goals associated with them.

Creating or adapting a Data Policies, Procedures and Style Manual will help your organization maintain accurate, consistent and actionable data that will serve your organization well into the future.