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Distribution Without "Mailing Lists"

Abstract

No, we don't have "mailing lists," even though we put out about 100 press releases each year.

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Distribution Without "Mailing Lists"

Walter W. Martin

No, we don't have "mailing lists," even though we put out about 100 press releases each year.

The philosophy behind our Selective Distribution System (SDS) is that (1) each release reporting research by the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Agricultural Research Service has a unique audience, and therefore (2) "rifling our shots" demands a customized distribution of each release.

We in the ARS north central region wish we were endowed with sufficient perception of people's interests and moods to deliver every copy of every release to exactly the right people, and none but the right people. We're not, but a computerized aid helps us toward that ideal.

We have a classified directory of about 4,900 addresses in our computer. These are potential outlets for reports from our 12-state region on ARS research in some 20 scientific disciplines. Some addresses or groups of addresses are used frequently, others occasionally, and still others are on call if or when needed.

SDS is a family of computer programs for storing and maintaining this address file, selecting addresses from the file for each mailing, and printing gummed mailing labels and the record of the addresses selected.

This family of computer programs was developed in 1976 exclusively for distributing north central region press releases. Later, SDS was adapted for mailings ranging from

Martin retired as a USDA public information officer August 21. If you have questions about the SDS computer activity, contact G. Ben Hardin, PIO, who now manages the system. He may be reached at USDA-ARS, 2000 West Pioneer Parkway, Peoria, Ill. 61615 (309/671-7150).

Why Not Mailing Lists?

The SDS concept permits more precision in structuring distribution of each release than what a colleague once termed "just pushing the peanut button."

A general mailing list title like "peanuts" or "hogs" does not define the precise media audience potential for many research reports. Does the research concern all producing areas, or just certain ones? Could marketers, an industry remote from agriculture or consumers in general use the information? Would nutritionists, environmentalists or science writers be interested? Is there an energy, resource conservation or food safety angle?

Using a mailing list inclusive enough to cover all such possibilities will deliver a proportion of unwanted releases to those on it whose interests are narrow. And restricted lists will fail to reach important potential outlets for some mailings. So, both rising mailing costs and media acceptance suggest some degree of selectivity in distribution.

SDS has given us a workable, quick way of tailoring distribution to audience peculiarities of individual releases.

Selectivity Begins With Address Coding

SDS derives its selectivity from the combination of an address file classified into more than 400 codes and the interaction of five possible selection factors in the computer program for retrieving addresses from that file for individual mailings.

The master coding scheme adopted by ARS information offices divides the address file into three parts, and each part into sections identified by letters of the alphabet:

Media by kind: Code numbers starting with A = General, B = Farm Magazines, C = Newspapers, D = Press Associations and Syndicates, E = Radio and Television, F = Specialized Writers.

Media by subject: G = Crops, H = Livestock, J = Industrial Research, Development and Processing, K = Agricultural Engineering, L = Environment, Conservation and Energy, M = Health and Human Nutrition.

Nonmedia: This classification with N through T codes was developed mainly for use by ARS information in Washington, D.C., but we routinely use O codes to mail

regional news releases to state extension specialists whose disciplines closely correspond to the stories.

Since selectivity is the name of the game, we break down larger subjects into component parts for coding. We have, for example, codes C303 through C306 for daily newspapers in four geographic sections of Illinois. Likewise, we have a code for Food Processing—General plus six codes for specific types of processing, such as baking and meat packing.

Only one or many addresses may constitute a code. About 170 of our codes have 10 or fewer addresses each, and 11 to 20 addresses are on an additional 120 codes. At the opposite extreme, 195 addresses make up code F400, Science Writers—General.

Each address, in turn, may carry up to 20 code numbers, but our average is 1.3 per address.

Building a Label Request

Each writer, who better knows the implications of what's being reported than anyone else, designates what addresses are to be selected by the computer for each mailing. Our routine for building a label request dates from our pre-computer days of early 1975, when we organized about 1,800 addresses by type of media or subject interest on 139 codes.

The writer scans a list of available codes, considering each against the main and subordinate themes of the release, and any geographic limitations. (What addresses are on a code can be checked out on a computer printout or by using the code number as a key word for on-screen look-up.) The label request may include all or some addresses on selected codes, or individual addresses on still other codes.

Someone familiar with the address file can compile a customized distribution pattern of 200 to 400 addresses in 15 or 20 minutes.

Before SDS, we then Xeroxed gummed labels from master copies of the selected codes, and peeled off labels of duplicate or unwanted addresses by hand. That procedure, in use about a year, gave us individualized distribution of releases but lacked a lot of being labor-efficient!

Our introduction to computers was trial mailings with labels produced locally at Bradley University's computer center. Before we got beyond trial runs, our headquarters obtained its own Datapoint hardware. The original version of SDS was one of the early systems brought up.

Selectivity Five Ways

Five selection options are at the SDS user's disposal in obtaining labels for a mailing:

1. Individual code numbers—Up to 60 code numbers accepted. (Addresses on A000, our code for in-house mailings, are furnished automatically each time the selection program is run.)
2. Range of code numbers—Addresses included throughout a range of code numbers may be chosen by a procedure in which the operator enters the first and last code numbers of the range. As many as 15 ranges can be selected.
3. Range of zipcodes—Addresses obtained by either individual or range-of-code-number requests may be limited to those within up to 15 specified ranges of zipcodes.
4. Rejects—Up to 100 addresses on requested codes (1 and 2 above) may be rejected by entering the four-numeral ID number of each.
5. Individual addresses—Additional addresses, usually not on any of the requested codes, may be selected by entering their four-numeral ID numbers.

Another option, useful in multiple-copy mailings, is printing the number of copies (other than 1) on each label. An address might have differing number-of-copies designations for each code number it carries—1 if on the corn code, 12 if wheat, 6 if soybeans, etc.

In addition, the computer totals both number of copies and number of labels for a mailing on a printed listing of the label request.

Those Pesky Duplicates

Duplicate addresses can be the bane of traditional mailing lists—unwanted doubling of labels to the same address for mailings, and correcting multiple lists when an address changes. With SDS, only one label is produced when an address is on more than one requested code. And a given address need be corrected only once to be updated wherever it may appear.

We have elected to have entries under more than one person's name or position title for some media outlets, particularly newspapers. The computer doesn't automatically eliminate potential duplication when more than one entry is involved; the unwanted version of the address must be eliminated by using the "reject" option.

The temporary file of selected addresses can be sorted before labels are printed—alphabetically, alphabetically by code number, zipcode order, etc. SDS accommodates five 30-character lines per address, but the identifier (publication, organization, university name) must appear on line 2 for alphabetizing. The addresses selected for a mailing may also be printed for record purposes.

Other programs in the SDS family include those for updating the address file and list of code names, for counting the number of addresses on each code and printing a list, and for printing out the address file (code or sorted order, partial or complete listings of addresses.)

Finally, the SDS information address file is one of 17 at our regional headquarters that can be key-word searched by a common procedure. Key work search locates addresses for verification, correction, deletion or other file maintenance activities. Any word or part-word from lines 1, 2 or 5 of the address, the zipcode, or code numbers may serve as key words.

Initially, we had some reservations about involvement with a computer, as an unknown and somewhat mysterious realm. Information, however, was intimately involved in deciding what the computer would be asked to do and in proposing improvements and modifications in programs. We consider what we have now to be as much ours as it is the creation of computer systems specialists.

And we wouldn't consider going back to "mailing lists."

