How I deal with wide datasets when building a predictive model

**Introduction**

In this post, I will describe a preprocessing workflow that I use  
whenever I have a lot variables (wide data) and need to build a  
predictive model quickly.

The workflow has three stages:

* Univariate feature selection using the  
  {Information}  
  package
* Feature engineering using the  
  {vtreat}  
  package
* Removal of redundant features using the  
  {caret}  
  package

The overall goal of the approach described here is to provide a  
reasonable number of highly relevent and non-redundant inputs to  
tree-based classification algorithms, such as random forests or gradient  
boosting machines.

To show how it works, let’s start by loading the necessary packages, and  
then get some example data.

# load packages

library(dplyr)

library(Information)

library(rsample)

library(caret)

library(tidyselect)

library(vtreat)

library(stringr)

**Example data**

I will use a dataset from the {Information} package to illustrate the  
workflow (actually two datasets, one called train and the other called  
valid). The data represent a marketing campaign with a treat-control  
design.

If we limit the dataset to the treat group, that gives us >10,000  
records and 70 variables. The response variable purchase is 1 or 0  
depending on whether the customer made a purchase or not. The predictors  
are mainly credit bureau variables.

Since the dataset is clean (all numeric), I’m going to dirty it up a bit  
by making unique\_id a character variable, and grouping the d\_region  
indicators into one character variable with 4 values.

# get example datasets

df1 <- Information::train

df2 <- Information::valid

# combine and dirty up

df <- df1 %>%

bind\_rows(df2) %>%

rename\_with(~str\_to\_lower(.)) %>%

filter(treatment == 1) %>%

select(-treatment) %>%

mutate(

unique\_id = as.character(unique\_id),

d\_region = case\_when(

d\_region\_a == 1 ~ "a",

d\_region\_b == 1 ~"b",

d\_region\_c == 1 ~ "c",

TRUE ~ "d"

)

) %>%

select(-c("d\_region\_a", "d\_region\_b", "d\_region\_c"))

rm(list = c("df1", "df2"))

**Data partitioning**

Avoid using the same data for feature preprocessing and model training  
as this could result in nested model bias. Instead, do a three-way  
split. For example, I will use 60% of the example data for model  
training, 20% for feature preprocessing, and 20% for testing.

set.seed(12345)

# split train vs. the rest

split1 <- initial\_split(df, 0.6, strata = purchase)

df\_train <- training(split1)

df\_split2 <- testing(split1)

# split preprocessing vs. test

split2 <- initial\_split(df\_split2, 0.5, strata = purchase)

df\_pre <- training(split2)

df\_test <- testing(split2)

rm(list = c("df", "df\_split2", "split1", "split2"))

Check to make the sure the split worked properly by seeing if the  
response variable mean is the same between samples.

tibble(

pre = mean(df\_pre$purchase),

train = mean(df\_train$purchase),

test = mean(df\_test$purchase)

)

## # A tibble: 1 x 3

## pre train test

##

## 1 0.201 0.201 0.201

**Information value**

Information value (IV) is a highly flexible approach that lets you  
measure the strength of association betweeen the response and each  
predictor. It’s a good way to filter out irrelevant variables prior to  
building a model.

There are several advantages of IV over other filtering methods.

* IV can detect linear and non-linear relationships
* IV scores allow you to directly compare continuous and categorical  
  variables
* IV can handle missing data without imputation and assess the  
  predictive power of NAs

It is good practice to split the preprocessing dataset prior to  
estimating IV. This allows you to adjust the IV estimates using  
cross-validation to prevent weak predictors from getting past the filter  
by chance.

set.seed(666)

# split preprocessing data

iv\_split <- initial\_split(df\_pre, 0.5, strata = "purchase")

df\_iv\_train <- training(iv\_split)

df\_iv\_test <- testing(iv\_split)

# calculate IV

iv <- create\_infotables(

data = df\_iv\_train,

valid = df\_iv\_test,

y = "purchase"

)

Note that the unique\_id variable was ignored because it has too many  
levels. This is a handy feature of the {Information} package when  
dealing with large datasets. It automatically ignores “junk” variables,  
like customer IDs and zip codes. Any feature that’s non-numeric with  
more than 1,000 levels gets excluded.

The create\_infotables() function will create a data frame (accessible  
via iv$Summary) with an IV estimate for each predictor, along with a  
cross-validation penalty, and the adjusted IV score.

Once you have the IV estimates, you will need to pick a threshold for  
excluding variables based on adjusted IV. This is subjective. But in  
general, the rule of thumb is:

| **IV** | **Predictive Power** |
| --- | --- |
| <0.02 | useless |
| 0.02 to 0.1 | weak |
| 0.1 to 0.3 | medium |
| 0.3 to 0.5 | strong |
| >0.5 | suspicious |

You don’t want to be too restrictive at this stage, especially if  
you are using a modeling approach that has a built-in feature selection  
process, as is the case with tree-based algorithms. Typically, I would  
drop all variables with adjusted IV <0.02. However, if most of the  
variables have relatively low IV scores, I would take the top\_n() and  
hope for the best.

# get top predictors

top\_iv <- iv$Summary %>%

filter(AdjIV > 0.02)

# save predictor names for filtering

top\_nm <- as.character(top\_iv$Variable)

top\_iv

## Variable IV PENALTY AdjIV

## 1 n\_open\_rev\_acts 0.78808585 0.071311360 0.71677449

## 2 tot\_hi\_crdt\_crdt\_lmt 0.83245714 0.117402471 0.71505467

## 3 ratio\_bal\_to\_hi\_crdt 0.65154998 0.116854610 0.53469537

## 4 m\_snc\_oldst\_retail\_act\_opn 0.57731695 0.089622002 0.48769495

## 5 d\_na\_m\_snc\_mst\_rcnt\_act\_opn 0.41328900 0.024885205 0.38840379

## 6 m\_snc\_mst\_rcnt\_act\_opn 0.50501697 0.166593270 0.33842370

## 7 hi\_retail\_crdt\_lmt 0.41075125 0.102026928 0.30872432

## 8 avg\_bal\_all\_prm\_bc\_acts 0.35052146 0.063045819 0.28747564

## 9 ratio\_retail\_bal2hi\_crdt 0.34148718 0.055783357 0.28570382

## 10 n\_of\_satisfy\_fnc\_rev\_acts 0.30889636 0.041741804 0.26715456

## 11 d\_na\_avg\_bal\_all\_fnc\_rev\_acts 0.25496525 0.021389665 0.23357559

## 12 prcnt\_of\_acts\_never\_dlqnt 0.33429544 0.103424077 0.23087136

## 13 avg\_bal\_all\_fnc\_rev\_acts 0.25673030 0.033986232 0.22274407

## 14 n\_fnc\_acts\_vrfy\_in\_12m 0.22964383 0.063106470 0.16653736

## 15 n\_fnc\_instlacts 0.16350030 0.040834858 0.12266544

## 16 student\_hi\_cred\_range 0.12048557 0.002198665 0.11828690

## 17 d\_region 0.15013706 0.035344772 0.11479229

## 18 n\_bc\_acts\_opn\_in\_24m 0.13566094 0.032034754 0.10362618

## 19 m\_snc\_mstrec\_instl\_trd\_opn 0.15369658 0.058175939 0.09552064

## 20 d\_na\_m\_snc\_oldst\_mrtg\_act\_opn 0.10629282 0.027184149 0.07910867

## 21 m\_snc\_oldst\_mrtg\_act\_opn 0.11175094 0.033558786 0.07819215

## 22 n\_bc\_acts\_opn\_in\_12m 0.10175870 0.033978431 0.06778027

## 23 tot\_othrfin\_hicrdt\_crdtlmt 0.07942734 0.011989605 0.06743773

## 24 n\_pub\_rec\_act\_line\_derogs 0.10838429 0.047075686 0.06130861

## 25 agrgt\_bal\_all\_xcld\_mrtg 0.11818141 0.061217651 0.05696376

## 26 ratio\_prsnl\_fnc\_bal2hicrdt 0.06122417 0.012688651 0.04853552

## 27 m\_snc\_mstrcnt\_mrtg\_act\_upd 0.05714766 0.011182831 0.04596483

## 28 n\_satisfy\_prsnl\_fnc\_acts 0.04345530 0.002040935 0.04141436

## 29 n\_bank\_instlacts 0.09145097 0.053917161 0.03753381

## 30 n\_30d\_and\_60d\_ratings 0.04249370 0.007780171 0.03471353

## 31 tot\_instl\_hi\_crdt\_crdt\_lmt 0.04437595 0.012048230 0.03232772

## 32 n\_disputed\_acts 0.04227185 0.010734430 0.03153742

## 33 d\_na\_m\_sncoldst\_bnkinstl\_actopn 0.04751751 0.024308098 0.02320941

## 34 n\_30d\_ratings 0.05123535 0.028309813 0.02292553

## 35 d\_na\_ratio\_prsnl\_fnc\_bal2hicrdt 0.02369415 0.001193081 0.02250107

## 36 n\_satisfy\_instl\_acts 0.06611851 0.044733739 0.02138477

## 37 n30d\_orwrs\_rtng\_mrtg\_acts 0.02693511 0.005762157 0.02117296

## 38 n\_inquiries 0.03130803 0.010250884 0.02105715

## 39 n\_retail\_acts\_opn\_in\_24m 0.07007429 0.049037889 0.02103640

## 40 n\_fnc\_acts\_opn\_in\_12m 0.03202549 0.011258903 0.02076659

## 41 n\_satisfy\_oil\_nationl\_acts 0.03283909 0.012552947 0.02028614

As you can see, filtering by adjusted IV reduces the number of  
predictors in our example dataset to 41. That implies that 37% of the  
original 65 predictors where probably “useless.”

**Feature engineering**

Vtreat is my go-to R package  
for common feature engineering tasks.

The {vtreat} package has functions that will automatically:

* Replace NAs with the column mean value (numeric) or majority class  
  (non-numeric)
* Create missing-indicator variables
* Dummy code all non-numeric variables with frequency >2% (rare  
  levels get grouped together)
* Truncate numeric distributions to mitigate outliers
* Create derived versions of non-numeric variables using prevalance  
  coding
* Prevalence coding replaces the levels of a categorical variable with the  
  proportion each level is observed in the dataset. Impact coding uses the  
  marginal effect from a single-variable logistic regression as a  
  replacement for each level in a categorical variable. Both derived  
  variables are numeric.

**Create treatment plan**

Use the designTreatmentsC() function to create a variable treatment  
plan for classification models. There are a lot of arguments for this  
function, so check the documentation. Save the treatment plan  
(vtreat\_plan) as an .RDS object so you can apply it to non-training  
data prior to generating model predictions.

# filter preprocessing data by IV

df\_vtreat <- df\_pre %>%

select(all\_of(top\_nm), purchase)

# create plan

vtreat\_plan <- designTreatmentsC(

dframe = df\_vtreat,

varlist = top\_nm,

outcomename = "purchase",

outcometarget = 1,

collarProb = .025

)

## [1] "vtreat 1.6.0 inspecting inputs Thu Jul 9 16:31:02 2020"

## [1] "designing treatments Thu Jul 9 16:31:02 2020"

## [1] " have initial level statistics Thu Jul 9 16:31:02 2020"

## [1] " scoring treatments Thu Jul 9 16:31:02 2020"

## [1] "have treatment plan Thu Jul 9 16:31:02 2020"

## [1] "rescoring complex variables Thu Jul 9 16:31:02 2020"

## [1] "done rescoring complex variables Thu Jul 9 16:31:03 2020"

**Prepare training data**

After you have the treatment plan object, you can apply it to a new  
dataset using prepare(). This creates a new data frame with treated  
variables based on the codeRestriction argument.

for a description of the different {vtreat} variable types.

# create treated data frame

df\_train2 <- prepare(

treatmentplan = vtreat\_plan,

dframe = df\_train,

codeRestriction = c("clean", "lev", "catB", "catP", "isBAD"),

doCollar = TRUE

)

**Explore derived variables**

# check the d\_region variable

df\_train2 %>%

select(contains("d\_region")) %>%

head()

## d\_region\_catP d\_region\_catB d\_region\_lev\_x\_a d\_region\_lev\_x\_b

## 1 0.3105683 -0.53748855 1 0

## 2 0.2592223 0.53943640 0 0

## 3 0.3105683 -0.53748855 1 0

## 4 0.3105683 -0.53748855 1 0

## 5 0.3105683 -0.53748855 1 0

## 6 0.1884347 -0.08657372 0 1

## d\_region\_lev\_x\_c d\_region\_lev\_x\_d

## 1 0 0

## 2 0 1

## 3 0 0

## 4 0 0

## 5 0 0

## 6 0 0

Notice that the original d\_region character variable has been  
transformed into 4 dummy indicators, plus 2 derived variables based on  
prevalence (“catP”) and impact coding (“catB”). The prepare() function  
will do this automatically for every non-numeric variable in the  
dataset.

**Remove redundant variables**

Redundant variables are predictors that are highly correlated with one  
or more other predictors in the dataset.

From a predictive accuracy standpoint, it is not strictly necessary to  
remove redundant variables prior to model fitting..

However, when using tree-based algorithms, it is helpful to remove  
redundant predictors in order to get more accurate variable importance  
rankings. To find the most redundant features in a dataset, I use the  
 [findCorrelation](https://topepo.github.io/caret/pre-processing.html#identifying-correlated-predictors) () function from the caret package.

# get names of redundant predictors

corr\_vars <- findCorrelation(

cor(

df\_train2,

method = "spearman"

),

cutoff = 0.9,

names = TRUE,

exact = TRUE

)

corr\_vars

## [1] "tot\_instl\_hi\_crdt\_crdt\_lmt" "n\_bank\_instlacts"

## [3] "n\_30d\_ratings"

**And voila…**

# filter out redundant predictors

df\_train3 <- df\_train2 %>% select(-all\_of(corr\_vars))

str(df\_train3)

## 'data.frame': 6020 obs. of 44 variables:

## $ n\_open\_rev\_acts : num 2 1 6 1 0 18 0 6 1 1 ...

## $ tot\_hi\_crdt\_crdt\_lmt : num 24300 11500 33600 200 0 ...

## $ ratio\_bal\_to\_hi\_crdt : num 5 0 0.4 0 36.1 ...

## $ m\_snc\_oldst\_retail\_act\_opn : num 164 164 71 367 164 ...

## $ d\_na\_m\_snc\_mst\_rcnt\_act\_opn : num 0 0 0 0 1 0 0 0 0 0 ...

## $ m\_snc\_mst\_rcnt\_act\_opn : num 92 23 9 161.8 29.9 ...

## $ hi\_retail\_crdt\_lmt : num 0 0 600 200 0 400 0 3000 400 0 ...

## $ avg\_bal\_all\_prm\_bc\_acts : num 607 0 61 2494 2494 ...

## $ ratio\_retail\_bal2hi\_crdt : num 11.5 11.5 0 0 11.5 ...

## $ n\_of\_satisfy\_fnc\_rev\_acts : num 0 0 0 0 0 3 0 1 0 0 ...

## $ d\_na\_avg\_bal\_all\_fnc\_rev\_acts : num 1 1 1 1 1 0 1 1 1 1 ...

## $ prcnt\_of\_acts\_never\_dlqnt : num 100 100 100 100 80.8 ...

## $ avg\_bal\_all\_fnc\_rev\_acts : num 1767 1767 1767 1767 1767 ...

## $ n\_fnc\_acts\_vrfy\_in\_12m : num 0 0 0 0 0 3 0 0 0 3 ...

## $ n\_fnc\_instlacts : num 1 0 0 0 0 2 0 1 0 5 ...

## $ student\_hi\_cred\_range : num 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 ...

## $ d\_region\_catP : num 0.311 0.259 0.311 0.311 0.311 ...

## $ d\_region\_catB : num -0.537 0.539 -0.537 -0.537 -0.537 ...

## $ n\_bc\_acts\_opn\_in\_24m : num 0 1 1 0 0 2 0 1 0 1 ...

## $ m\_snc\_mstrec\_instl\_trd\_opn : num 126.9 41.8 41.8 41.8 41.8 ...

## $ d\_na\_m\_snc\_oldst\_mrtg\_act\_opn : num 1 1 1 1 1 0 1 1 1 0 ...

## $ m\_snc\_oldst\_mrtg\_act\_opn : num 139 139 139 139 139 ...

## $ n\_bc\_acts\_opn\_in\_12m : num 0 0 1 0 0 1 0 0 0 1 ...

## $ tot\_othrfin\_hicrdt\_crdtlmt : num 0 0 0 0 0 ...

## $ n\_pub\_rec\_act\_line\_derogs : num 0 0 0 0 2 0 2 0 0 5 ...

## $ agrgt\_bal\_all\_xcld\_mrtg : num 1214 0 122 0 0 ...

## $ ratio\_prsnl\_fnc\_bal2hicrdt : num 51.7 51.7 51.7 51.7 51.7 ...

## $ m\_snc\_mstrcnt\_mrtg\_act\_upd : num 0.665 0.665 0.665 0.665 0.665 ...

## $ n\_satisfy\_prsnl\_fnc\_acts : num 0 0 0 0 0 1 0 0 0 1 ...

## $ n\_30d\_and\_60d\_ratings : num 0 0 0 0 0 5 0 0 0 16 ...

## $ n\_disputed\_acts : num 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 ...

## $ d\_na\_m\_sncoldst\_bnkinstl\_actopn: num 1 1 1 1 1 1 1 1 1 1 ...

## $ d\_na\_ratio\_prsnl\_fnc\_bal2hicrdt: num 1 1 1 1 1 0 1 1 1 0 ...

## $ n\_satisfy\_instl\_acts : num 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 1 ...

## $ n30d\_orwrs\_rtng\_mrtg\_acts : num 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 8 ...

## $ n\_inquiries : num 0 0 1 0 4 1 2 0 0 16 ...

## $ n\_retail\_acts\_opn\_in\_24m : num 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 ...

## $ n\_fnc\_acts\_opn\_in\_12m : num 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 ...

## $ n\_satisfy\_oil\_nationl\_acts : num 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 ...

## $ d\_region\_lev\_x\_a : num 1 0 1 1 1 0 1 1 0 1 ...

## $ d\_region\_lev\_x\_b : num 0 0 0 0 0 1 0 0 0 0 ...

## $ d\_region\_lev\_x\_c : num 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 ...

## $ d\_region\_lev\_x\_d : num 0 1 0 0 0 0 0 0 1 0 ...

## $ purchase : num 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 ...

After filtering by IV, treating with {vtreat}, and removing 3 redundant  
variables, the final dataset has 43 predictors that are all numeric and  
ready for model training.

**Conclusion**

The preprocessing workflow described here works well for the sorts of  
modeling projects I work