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INDUSTRY TRENDS
THERE'S ALWAYS A TRADE-OFF

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Written by Wes Trochlil

Many years ago, while working as a communications director for an association, I learned an interesting lesson from a printer. We were discussing an upcoming printing project. I was getting a late start on the project so I needed it done quickly—but I also wanted it done inexpensively and with the same quality as I had received on past projects.

“Wes,” he said, “I can provide low price, fast delivery, and high quality—but you can only have two of those three at any one time.” That is, if I wanted my project completed quickly and at a low price, the quality would be lower. On the other hand, if I wanted it done quickly and of higher quality, I would have to pay a higher price. Or I could have a low price and high quality, but I could expect a longer delivery time.

This was my first object lesson in understanding what I’ve come to term as “trade-offs” and how they affect everything we do.

Evaluating the Risks?

I spend a lot of time helping associations choose and implement association management systems. During that process, my clients ask a lot of questions about best product, best process, and best practices. My response is that there is always a trade-off.

For example, my client may ask, “Should we choose a web-based system or a traditional client-server package?” With a fully browser-based system, you may access the database from anywhere that you have an Internet connection and a web browser, making this system easier to access remotely than traditional client-server systems. The downside is that browser-based systems are typically slower for intensive data processing, which may make them less appealing if your organization does a lot of heads-down data entry. The trade-off here is easier remote access for slower data entry time.

For each decision you face, understanding the trade-offs will help you make your decision. In data management, for example, we face trade-offs all day long. Thinking about allowing your members and customers to manage their data online via your website? That’s great; you should. The downside is that you’ll have more duplicate data, there will be more inconsistency within the data (e.g., ALLCAPS instead of upper and lower case), and you’ll have to spend more time cleaning up these data. The upside is that your staff should spend a lot less time entering data in the first place, as your members and customers do the data entry for you. The trade-off? More time spent cleaning up data, and less time spent entering data in the first place. The benefit is that you’re likely to spend a lot less time on data cleanup than you were spending on data entry, thus freeing your staff for other, higher value activities.

Weighing Your Options

The list of data management trade-offs goes on. Want to get more staff working in the database, to get better and more up-to-date data? You should. But the trade-off is that you’ll have more data entry errors and more cleanup.

Want to track all kinds of new demographic information on your members to improve your targeted marketing? Go for it. But understand the trade-off: Tracking more data requires you to pay more attention to those data, to ask for them more often, and to do everything you can to make sure they’re up to date.

Every decision you make during your day, whether it’s about data management, staff management, or even personal life management, comes with a trade-off. Understanding those trade-offs will help you make the decisions that are right for you and your organization. This article originally appeared in the December 2006 issue of Technoscope from ASAE.

About the Author

For more than 20 years, Wes Trochlil has worked in and with dozens of associations and membership organizations providing a range of consulting services, from general consulting on data management issues to full-scale, association-wide selection and implementation of association management systems. Follow Wes on Twitter @westrochlil. His website is www.effectedatabase.com.

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