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10 data strategy mistakes and how to avoid them – even on small analytics projects

Data analytics projects play a critical role not just in creating customer intelligence for better marketing campaigns but in steering the strategic direction of entire organizations. Every analytics project, big or small, can drive outsized returns.

The problem is, many companies rush into using tools and tactics too quickly (we're looking at you, AI), skipping the foundational data strategy work that's necessary for success. Acxiom's data analytics team sees this time and again, especially on smaller analytics projects, where major consequences can arise from seemingly minor data issues.

We've supported our clients on thousands of analytics initiatives of all sizes, and these are the top 10 data strategy mistakes we see that are derailing projects. Take a look at the negative consequences that await those who rush in – and some tips on how to build a solid data strategy foundation that will make sure your analytics project doesn't crack under pressure.

Top 10 mistakes when pulling data files for analysis

1 Lack of conversation between analytics team and client stakeholders.

Consequence
Confusion, unclear objectives, unmet expectations, and poorly defined data requirements.

How to avoid
Make sure everyone's on the same page from the start. Get aligned on goals, objectives, and KPIs to set expectations and maximize your chances of success.

2 Lack of agreement on data requirements.

Consequence
Lack of agreement among stakeholders may decrease confidence in insights, recommendations, and results.

How to avoid
Gain explicit agreement from all relevant stakeholders on the data requirements that will drive success for each analysis initiative.

3 Missing name and address on one or more files.

Consequence
Can't append third-party data; hinders identity resolution; may signal problems with underlying data; reduces audience size; file may be too small for meaningful analysis.

How to avoid
Ensure your data is clean, complete, and current.

4   Missing or inconsistent customer IDs across files.

Consequence
Can't link data; may not be able to append third-party data; limits analysis.

How to avoid
Use a robust private identity graph, first-party tagging, and data hygiene to ensure you can connect and enhance your data effectively.

5   Missing customer data, e.g., no dependent variable or response data.

Consequence
Can't build model(s) or may have incomplete analysis.

How to avoid
Identify gaps in current data and explore if data can be sourced for these objectives and use cases.

6   Missing file layout, data dictionary, and expected quantities.

Consequence
Inability to effectively perform quality assurance; the file may be missing critical data.

How to avoid
Record and share these data fundamentals, including any quantity limits affecting analysis (such as minimum file or segment size), and a data dictionary that states details like data type, format, description, values, and null allowances for each field on the file.

7   Missing or inconsistent customer IDs across files.

Consequence
Inability to compare performance or insights between the two periods.

How to avoid
Define time-related data needs up front. For example, are you using a single timeframe (recency) or comparing multiple time periods (one year, year over year, or quarter over quarter)? Establish your campaign and attribution window, too – pre/active/post-campaign.

8 File is not at the right level, e.g., individual vs. household.

Consequence
Inaccurate analysis, insights, recommendations, and results.

How to avoid
An important aspect of your data format requirements is data level. Specify whether you're dealing with aggregated, individual, address, or household; detailed or summary.

9 File contains individuals or households not in the right geography, e.g., state or country.

Consequence
May trigger a privacy review or may not have enough records in the right country, state, or region. In addition, countries outside the U.S. have different data elements, data governance rules, and pricing.

How to avoid
Review your data hygiene measures to ensure appropriate location data (e.g. ZIP code, ZIP+4, ZIP+11, DMA, geo radius, state, country, etc.) and ensure any geographical exclusions are followed. In the bigger picture, ensure you have a handle on data privacy and security requirements across all relevant regions globally.

10 Not including the right customer set and/or forgetting suppressions (active, inactive, prospect, high-value, lapsed, deceased, employees).

Consequence
Perform analysis and gain insights on the wrong audience where you did not intend to act.

How to avoid
Features like data exclusions are an important part of file structure that should be checked for accuracy. Likewise, a rigorous quality assurance process is critical to ensure you're including all the right data – and none of the wrong data.

Get the data strategy fundamentals right
– the first time

If you're planning a data analytics project, big or small, make sure you set yourself up for success. Make your first step a smart one: **email our analytics experts** to discuss your data strategy needs.

About Acxiom

Acxiom® is the global leader in customer intelligence and stands at the forefront of AI-enabled, data-driven marketing. As part of the Interpublic Group of Companies, Inc. (IPG), we specialize in high-performance solutions that boost customer acquisition and retention while fueling growth for the world's biggest brands and agencies. We transform omnichannel marketing strategies and execution using our AI-powered data and identity foundation, cloud-based data management, and martech and analytics services. For over 55 years, our teams across the US, UK, Germany, China, Poland, and Mexico have helped businesses optimize their marketing and advertising investments while prioritizing customer privacy.

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