

# VOTER CONTACT NEWS

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## Building New Hampshire voter files

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On green-and-white license plates, they assert "Live Free or Die."

New Hampshire natives reflect this attitude in a strong tradition of local government and decentralized administration. They like it and tourists like it. But this kind of government makes building voter files in New Hampshire complex, costly and confusing.

Every four years, presidential campaigns in New England confront the painful realities of voter file development. They have historically found little to work with. There are files, but many are incomplete, old or simply inadequate for the sophisticated targeting and field efforts presidential campaigns need in New Hampshire.

Voted Contact Services ("VCS") has been building voter files since 1972—and, in New Hampshire, since 1984. In 1987, VCS decided to rebuild and enhance its current file. This article is a summary of the difficulties, processes and costs associated with that efforts.

### *Town and city government*

In New Hampshire, the "action" is in the 234 towns and cities. Counties seem to exist only to allow political consultants a convenient unit for analysis.

Every town has a Town Clerk; each city, a City Clerk. A list of their addresses and phone numbers is a prerequisite to any file building. But the list is insufficient because the sale and maintenance of lists in the towns is in the hands of elected officials called "Supervisors of the Checklists." Calling the Town Clerk is a good start because, if nothing else, the Clerk can give you the Supervisor's number. (In rare and happy instances, they are the same person.) In the cities, the Clerk can usually process your order without an appeal to a higher authority.

Your first challenge, therefore, is in contacting 234 communities. Often, you have to make two or three calls before reaching the person with the necessary authority.

### *Lists*

The number of towns (234) equals the number of separate types of list maintenance. They fall into four

categories: town tapes, service bureau tapes, diskettes/disks and paper.

The size of the community has nothing to do with the sophistication of the data. Some very small towns, for example, are on service bureaus, while the large communities of Concord and Dover are on paper. To make matters worse, cities and towns that maintain their own computerized list use a variety of computers and programs, ranging from IBM System 34 to Tandy micro-computers.

### *Data*

When you purchase a list in New Hampshire, you usually get name, address, city/town, precinct/ward, zip code and party registration—although some small towns omit one or more of these critical items.

There are a number of problems with New Hampshire source data:

1. In many small to medium size towns, people do not receive mail at home. Some towns provide residential and mailing addresses; others, only one of the two. Many give you the mailing address only if you remember to ask for it.

Although the situation is improving as more towns provide both addresses, it is still a problem in some areas.

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purchases.”**

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2. Some lists come with only one zip code, even though the town has multiple zip codes. If you know where the problems are, you can often get the Town Clerk to give you a more complete zip code breakdown over the phone, especially where precinct and zip codes coincide.

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3. Street names are not standardized on lists. Many medium size towns have the same street listed under three different names. This causes problems when doing a walk by creating confusion and more paper than is necessary.
4. Lists are updated irregularly, if at all. It is very important to find out when the list you are purchasing was last updated and when it will be updated again.

### Costs

"Live Free or Die" does not refer to list purchases.

Paper list prices are relatively stable, usually costing \$25 per precinct; and tape, diskette and service bureau costs are much less stable than the paper market. Manchester alone is \$500. The purchase terms are "cash up-front", since in New Hampshire credit is something you get for a job well done. List acquisition costs alone approach \$10,000—not including keypunching, conversion, mailing and labor.

### Enhancement

VCS has made a real effort to improve source data. In addition to gender and ethnicoding, carrier routing, address standardization and phone matching, VCS has added vote history, age and social security number.

Voter history for many elections is on microfiche at the Secretary of State's office. Actually putting this data up is a costly and time consuming process involving hours of keypunching and list marking. VCS currently has vote history from the 1986 general and the 1984 presidential primary.

### Collection Process

A serious effort to build a New Hampshire file is a management process involving:

1. *Setting goals.* Given your campaign goals and resources, how much of a file do you want? Do you want all areas? All voters?
2. *Gathering information.* After collecting the appropriate numbers and addresses, you must call every town and find out:
  - type of list
  - cost of list
  - update information
  - data available
  - zip code and address correction required
  - method of payment and acquisition

3. *Tracking.* Because you are dealing with so many towns and types of data, you must be efficient in tracking where you have been, what you bought, how much each list is, how each list is maintained and so on. This gives you information as the process goes along, plus provides a data base for your next update/re-building effort.
4. *Systemization.* Form letters requesting permission to purchase from towns or permission from towns to access service bureaus are critical.
5. *Personnel.* Dividing the lists by type of file or geography speeds up the process and prevents one staff worker from being too overburdened. It also greatly increases the need for coordination.

As a result of these efforts—careful data collection, broad enhancements, additions of phones, birthdates, multiple voter history and carrier routing—the New Hampshire file enables a campaign to execute any plan.

In the end, your file is only as useful as your campaign plan and your vendor's ability to deliver the right product at the right price. New Hampshire file building presents great difficulties for any campaign with limited time and resources. The process and efforts summarized in this article cost up to \$30,000 for a complete, enhanced file. It is important for any campaign to ask if they have the time, ability and money to undertake such an effort, or if it makes sense to go with an already existing, well-constructed file.

The file described was built by VCS at their own expense and is available to any campaign organization solely for the cost of the product; there is no access fee.

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