

Professionals use profiling to capture their targets!

by Bruce A. Love

*H*eadquarters has issued a directive to pursue new "persons of interest." The targets this time are unmarried, college-educated, African-American males between the ages of 18 and 25. Successfully completing this mission will probably mean big financial rewards for the organization, and the individual who coordinates the operation. Activities, such as these, involve the sort of profiling that takes place every day in the boardrooms of many companies.

*I*n business, it is acceptable to conduct what is called target marketing. This is a form of profiling that makes assumptions about individuals based upon sets of characteristics they share with others in associated groups. The purpose of this is to try to reach segments of the population with carefully crafted ads designed to have strong appeal with the identified market segments. Criteria such as age, gender, race, religion, location, and economic status, are all factors that are examined by marketers who look for ways to segment markets and capture customers. Similar tactics, if used by law enforcement, are often criticized as being politically incorrect, a violation of civil rights, and even illegal.

*T*arget marketing uses resources effectively and efficiently to pursue only those customers who are the most likely to be interested in products or services offered by an organization. Businesses, motion picture studios, politicians, and others, have all used target marketing to reach specific populations, and to get us to buy what they are selling. Before they are able to do this, however, organizations need accurate information about us.

*I*nformation comes from many sources. Some companies buy the information from list brokers whose business is collecting, and selling, information about us. Brokers get information from various sources including phone interviews, product registration cards, online surveys, magazine publishers, and other forms and questionnaires. Some county

offices also sell addresses, names, and statistics about their residents. This information can be used to target us individually, but many times it is used to paint a profile of a group of people so that marketing efforts can be created to appeal to larger segments of the population.

*O*f course, there is the potential for abuse when using target marketing. R.J. Reynolds Tobacco Company has demonstrated this numerous times. Several years ago, the cartoon-like character "Joe Camel" was introduced to help Camel cigarettes appeal to younger audiences. Hook them young and have a customer for life seemed to be their strategy. In another instance, a Reynolds internal memo revealed that a new cigarette, called Dakota, was to be marketed to "virile" white females between the ages of 18 and 24 who attended tractor pulls, and who had no education beyond high school. Such deliberate attempts by R.J. Reynolds to prey upon economically disadvantaged young people were met with outrage, and those campaigns were eventually discontinued.

*F*or the most part, target marketing makes good business sense and has been implemented ethically and effectively. As consumers, we are frequently the subject of targeted advertisements based upon our interests and needs. Such targeted approaches save us from being bombarded by many more ads than we already receive, and often provide us with discounts on items that we use most. From a company's perspective, target marketing ensures that companies do not waste their time and advertising budget on efforts that broadly target the entire population, when their primary focus is often much narrower. For example, a company wouldn't launch a marketing effort that reached the entire US population, when their intended focus was limited to a segment comprised of middle-eastern men, age 18 to 35, who have just arrived in the United States using one-way airline tickets. That just wouldn't make sense!

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