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## Why Location Is a Growing Issue for CRM Systems

– David Taber, CIO

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CRM systems have always held addresses for the contacts and companies you're selling to. Sure, each vendor handles addresses in its own way—and vendors will have endless arguments about how *its* approach is better—but that's the layer of the problem that doesn't really matter.

Vendors and consultants have lots of workarounds to make that part of the playing field fairly level. In a similar way, there are proven address normalization and cleansing tools and services that can get the street address and town in good shape, at least for North American addresses.

Let's go deeper, though, by looking into some unsolved location problems that span all the systems that CRM users interact with.

### ISO Codes: Identifying Countries Two Letters at a Time

Humans like entering country information in their own way—be it Estados Unidos, Etats-Unis or United States—so a classic remedy on data entry forms is to present the list of relevant countries to users as a pick-list. While this eliminates misspellings, the pick-list of all possible countries is too long for any screen.

#### Tip: [Cloud Meets CRM: How to Track Who's Who](#)

There are lots of sneaky ways to adjust the country pick-list dynamically so the user isn't presented with an overwhelming scroll. Those same coding tricks can be used to localize to the user's language, but they can be quite the spaghetti-fest of code. A better approach is a manual-entry field that does type-ahead or other techniques that offer the user a dynamically shortened list of the most likely countries for the auto complete.

So far, so good, as we can have country and province names that are well-behaved. But that's not what you really want, particularly in a multinational sales, marketing and channel operation. What would be best is to store countries and provinces as the [International Standards Organization's two-character codes](#). That'll be what rules, workflows, filters and Boolean statements like best: totally regular codes invulnerable to misspelling or word-order errors.

Of course, this works only for the systems that you control. What about the enterprise systems you don't control, including the other data sources that push data into the CRM tables? You guessed it: You need a data filter layer, either as part of your integration server or as a cyclical process that runs through the CRM records to ensure address conformance. This needs to be table-driven, with lookups for all the permutations of error patterns you discover, such as that marketing automation system that insists upon calling South Korea "Korea, Republic Of."

Then there are those pesky humans. They don't like memorizing ISO codes, so you'll need read-only spelled-out translations of the country and province names, probably in two forms: English, and the local language of that country. The listing for DE, for example, would include Germany and Deutschland. That way, the mailroom and distribution center have what they need to get stuff out the door.

## Lat-Long Grids Can Ease Sales Territory Management

As I wrote in [the Territorial Imperative](#), sales territories are a critical management theme for account development, inside sales, outside sales, channel sales and support organizations. Get it wrong, and you'll have a dozen reps outside your office within minutes.

### Analysis: [Why CRM Data Trumps CRM Systems](#)

Geography is the starting point for most territories. Your firm may have several overlays and exceptions that follow the named-account model, whether they're government accounts, industry verticals or particular product lines, but geography will be part of the formula no matter how complex your sales territories may be.

At the top level, country and province are intuitive, easy to enforce and represent few problems, provided you're on the ISO-code bandwagon. Below that, things get dicey. Phone numbers—area codes in North America, city codes elsewhere—are intuitive but wrong. Easily 25 percent misrepresent a customer's location thanks to VoIP, number portability, mobile phones and other issues. Move away from this criterion for territories as fast as you can, as the non-geographic problem gets worse every month.

ZIP or other postal code systems are equally attractive for sales territory management, particularly in countries that have a purely geographic coding paradigm. A non-geographic paradigm for postal codes works fine in countries where the economies are highly concentrated, such as France or Ireland, and you know that most of the high-value purchase decisions will be made in a handful of postal codes—for example, 75001-75020 in France or 10001-10150 in the U.S. In the hinterland of these countries, though, the postal codes map is a crazy quilt that is useful only for the postal service, not your sales team. Counties are little more useful, unless you're selling to agricultural markets.

### Commentary: [Google Says Businesses Could Benefit From Location-Based Intelligence](#)

The answer, of course, is to move to a [latitude and longitude coordinate system](#) for territories. This is made easier by Web services that will translate addresses into lat/long (and back again) and further supplemented by marketing automation systems that estimate lat/long and even guess a company's name from the IP address of your website visitors and registrants. Things get even juicier if you integrate location-based services for the people who are using smartphones to call you or mobile apps to interact with your support and service organization.

As you move to a lat/long grid, you'll find it simplest for all CRM systems if your territories are rectilinear—that is, defined as a series of rectangular shapes.

## Know Where Customers Are, Not Just Who They Are

As I discussed in [the CRM Identity Crisis](#), a key CRM success factor is quickly figuring out exactly who is the prospect or customer. That problem has only gotten worse with the profusion of email and social network identities that high-value targets have.

Once you've figured out who these folks are, though, you need to figure out where they are. Getting that location right, assigning the prospect to the right territory and keeping that information consistent and coherent across all systems so that you can respond in the way that's effective for their current location all remains a challenge for most CRM implementations deployed today.

While they shouldn't be regarded as the be-all and end-all, country codes and latitude/longitude coordinates offer a good start. Use them in tandem with a sound knowledge management strategy and you should be getting somewhere.

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