Geodemographics: Your Junk Mail & GIS by Jon C. Malinowski, Ph.D.

Ever wonder how your junk mail ends up in your mail box, or if everyone in the country gets the same junk mail? Is it simply because a company you purchased from sold its mailing list? Well, no. In fact, geographic information has a lot to do with the contents of your friendly neighborhood mail carrier.

Most people know that governments collect geographically-coded information every time they do a census. Income, housing status, ethnicity, and education levels are all variables that are included in a comprehensive census. In the United States, Canada, and Great Britain, this information is readily available to anyone.

But, other demographic data is also available about your hometown from non-governmental groups that track religious preferences, the arts, and sports. Combine this information with census information and its easy to determine a lot about your community.

Finally, there is additional financial information that comes from credit card and other financial companies. Every time you purchase something, a computer can code your home zip code with the type of purchase made.

Marketing companies take all of this data and run complex statistical operations that essentially cluster everyone in the United States into a small number of similar groups, usually around fifty. Thus, one group might be white, high-income professionals that own two or more cars, while another cluster might be single, ethnically-diverse renters.

Using a geographic information system (GIS), a geographer can plot these clusters to isolate certain zip codes that are the strongest for each cluster. This information can then be sold to companies who want to market to a certain group by way of the mail, television, or radio.

Therefore, companies know if you're likely to buy an expensive car before they send you the pricey catalog they invested in.

They don't want you to just trash a $4 catalog because you're not interested.

While some people have criticized the "clustering" of all people into a few groups, the practice is big business and requires skills that geographers can deliver.

To see an example, surf on over to:

<http://yawyl.claritas.com>

Further Research

1. Read Michael J. Weiss' book *The Clustering of America*, a fun and readable look at how important clustering is to American marketers.

2. Explore the offerings at the Geodemographics Knowledge Base listed in the Links section. They have dozens of links to all aspects of this field.

3. Check out *American Demographics*, an industry magazine that often addresses geodemographics and certainly has ads by the key players in the field. Their website, listed in the Links section, usually has some free articles.

Links:

- U.S. Census Bureau — www.census.gov
- Claritas — www.claritas.com
- Geodemographics Knowledge Base at MRS — www.geodemographics.org.uk
- Cluster Analysis: What is it? — obelia.jde.aca.mmu.ac.uk/multivar/ca.htm
- American Demographics Magazine — www.inside.com