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Offering online access to marketing services is now a basic component of any service provider's offering. In general, online services have been split into list sales and cleansing via relatively simple portals, and the more advanced dedicated front ends to bureau-hosted databases with whopping monthly fees to match. This is now changing.

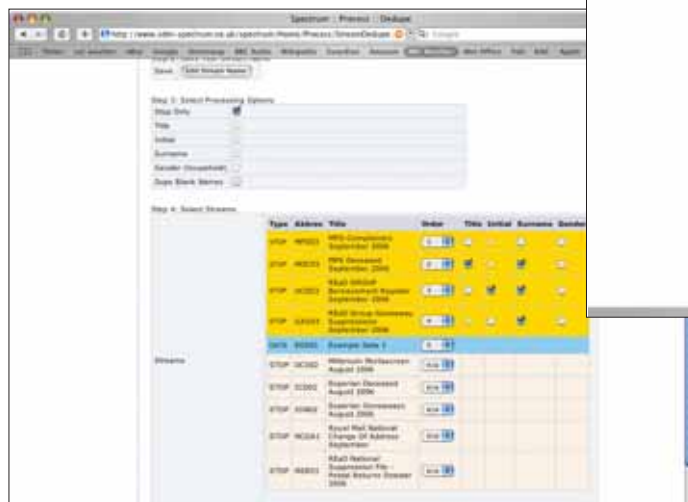
Experian's Fusion and Market Location's Horizon services, launched this month, blend more complex automated toolsets with expert bureau backup so that users can choose how much they do themselves and which tasks should be done by the outsourcer. SDM's

data selection and analysis) are accessed through the same front end, they are in effect three completely different systems and there is no way for the remote user to move files between them, for example to dedupe a prospect data selection against an uploaded customer file or to append extra variables to enrich a customer file. This is Spectrum's biggest flaw and a major missed opportunity to compete with services like Blue Tahiti.

For data processing – the main element of the service – the first place to go is to the Transfer section to upload a file. This is simple and clear enough, with the usual field mapping process to follow and a couple of

BUREAU CONNECTION

James Lawson reviews the latest online data management and processing service to hit the marketplace.



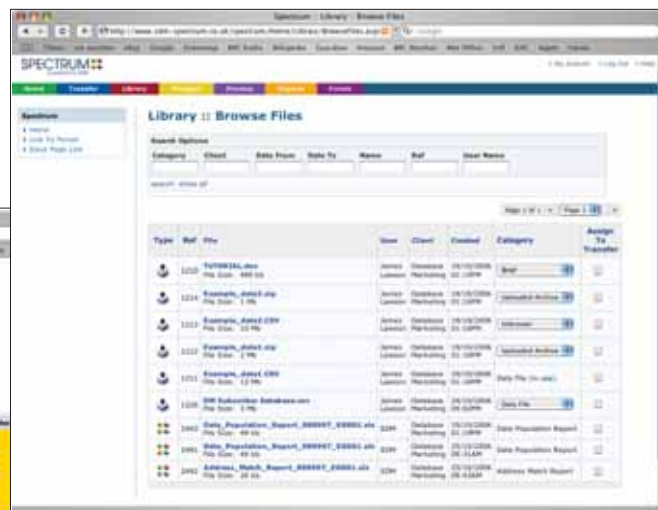
Though the interface is initially confusing, it's possible to run over 200 client files simultaneously through the merge/purge/suppress process.

Spectrum service, which we're looking at here, attempts much the same thing.

Put it on the web

Spectrum is rather different to services like UKChanges' DCO service and Experian Intact which provide a restricted toolset and as few preferences to set as possible, along with a very clear interface and good helpdesk backup, to appeal to as wide a range of users as possible. By bolting a web front end onto an in-house server, Spectrum offers some of the extra options normally restricted to an in-house operator but is also considerably more challenging for the novice.

After logging in, the user sees an overview of the different elements of the service with main menu items on a multicoloured bar along the top. Though the service's three main components (cleansing, consumer



All files and reports from a client's projects reside in the library section.

reports available to check for suspicious fields, though there is no data manipulation offered anywhere. Users would be advised to strip out everything but name, address and URN before uploading as apparently fields containing variables like

Boolean operators can stall subsequent processing. Files are automatically coded up with URNs and matched to PAF as part of the import stage; this is invisible to the user and there's a report on the success or otherwise of the PAF matching.

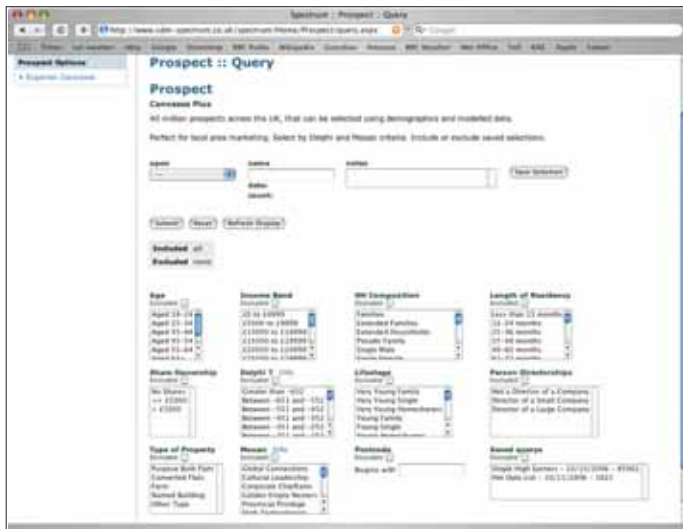
Within the processing module, files are organised into projects, which would normally equate to a mailing, with individual files defined within them as "streams". Users select the project they want, view the files within them, pick one or more, and then select what they want to do with them from the menu bar down the left hand side of the screen.

This offers pretty much all that you'd need to processing a mailing file: dedupe, suppression, mailsort, barcode and file export. The merge/purge facility stands out, offering simultaneous multi-file dedupe and suppression, something not available in any other

online service as far as this reviewer is aware. However the way that the interface presents this is pretty confusing on first viewing, with both suppression matching and deduping lumped together with the suppression files on offer within a single hierarchical table.

The user selects the order in which the suppression files should be used (for example, 1 for the cheapest file at the top of the hierarchy and so on) and also which of the client lists should be the master file, second and so on using a series of drop-down boxes. To put it another way, it defines the merge/purge hierarchy governing which file's records should be retained or deleted when matches are found.

It certainly would be far clearer to split out the hierarchies for the suppression files from the order of importance of the client files, but once this idiosyncrasy is understood, it probably saves time. After this, like other online services, it's slightly disappointing to find there's no way for the advanced user to tweak matching



The Prospect module is a straightforward tool used to run counts on Experian's Canvase list.

criteria or confidence levels, or to perform multiple passes with different preferences.

Tickboxes alongside each suppression file govern which fields are used for matching, for example, initial and surname for mortality but surname only for gone-aways. This is clear and works well. According to SDM, it's possible to run over 200 client files simultaneously through the merge/purge process which certainly moves the online services game on a step or two.

Finish the job

Hitting the submit button queues the job for processing and you can view its progress via the Process Queue option. Speed is down to how many other jobs are in the pipeline, but some concrete estimate of the completion time would be welcome.

Going back to the Project Streams overview, the next step would usually be to export the net mailing file. Like the import stage, this is relatively straightforward

with the choice to export everything, the net file, the dupes to be deleted or the dupes to be kept, plus which fields are wanted. This is where a PO account number has to be entered with extra being charged for exporting permanent suppression flags or if cleaned PAF-matched addresses are desired. Mailsort coding and barcoding are much simpler; just select the file to code up and run it through.

Other aspects of the processing service include being able to specify that a file appears in every project, for example, a company-wide stop file, and you can also pull a file from one project to another. Strangely, it's impossible as the service stands for any user to delete files once they are uploaded which is a surprising omission. It's possible to specify the access level of a user so that they may be able to run jobs but not import data. For example, an agency operator might want access to multiple client projects.

The Library section holds all files and reports for all projects. By entering project codes and selecting the relevant objects, you can then email off what you want to whatever online destination. All communications with the website are 128-bit encrypted.

The Prospect module is a competent performer, though again completely separate from the other functions. In addition, the supplier will have to fulfil any data orders manually, which is bizarre when the idea is supposedly to offer an automated service. However, the ability to make your own selections from Experian's 40m-strong Canvase Plus file does remove the Chinese whispers effect of doing it over the phone or by email, letting you quickly run what-if interactive counts via the back-end list.

Buyers tick or click their selection criteria to get hold of a tabular count of what volume their selection offers for each variable. It's nothing new, the interface is average and Experian itself has offered this sort of service through Prospect Locator for years, but it's worth having as part of the package if the rates are competitive.

The Analysis module as reviewed was a generic query tool; each client implementation would be bespoke to match their data and query requirements. In this respect, it's along the lines of how many marketers have accessed their bureau-hosted data for years. The screen is a more friendly front-end to SQL Server, avoiding the need to build SQL queries directly when running counts, and any functionality, such as cross-tabs or RFV scoring, that SQL Server supports can be coded in.

Again, any customer files for analysis have to be loaded on manually by SDM, there's no link to processing or data selection and, believe it or not, you can't extract any data as it stands either. As there is no built-in graphing or visualisation whatsoever, that severely limits its application; how do you get a selection out to Excel? The client would almost certainly want the bureau to run the monthly refresh, that's the idea behind getting maintenance-free access to a hosted data

set after all, but any decent online analysis environment should at least offer the chance to upload your own files for a quick look.

It's unlikely the analysis module will win many friends unless the cost is very low indeed. The interface is amateurish compared to other recent entrants like Experian Fusion and the way that the screen slowly refreshes after every change quickly becomes distracting and irritating. A suitably tuned in-house SQL Server installation with all its associated BI tools on offer would be a much more attractive option.

Go for the processing

The Spectrum interface is distinctly user-unfriendly with various hyperlinks scattered about seemingly at random, and lacks the clean simplicity of Direct Connect Online. It also lacks the facility to schedule when jobs will run and there's no indication of how long a job will take once submitted for processing.

But the heavyweight multfile processing makes up for many sins and the interface would be no barrier to someone reasonably clued up on data processing – though the average SME marketing manager might be another matter. The system does fall between two stools somewhat in that it's dumbed down to appeal to a wider audience with a restricted range of reference files, yet the standing charge will deter smaller or irregular users. The larger clients that it seeks to cater for may actually want the wider choice of reference files offered

by big bureaux like meta-morphix along with the option to customise the matching for their own data.

The data selection tool works well enough, but is hamstrung by a lack of export facilities and no integration with other functions, while the Analysis module is really a development platform as it stands. Set against a dedicated installed tool, it is slow and clunky.

Data processing is by far Spectrum's strongest suit and will appeal to those that want to process large amounts of data remotely. The extra complexity of the interface would soon be overcome by a little familiarity and the monthly standing charge plus royalty pricing is exceptionally reasonable for those sorts of customers. Depending on per-hit charges and how its matching performs on your data (testing will be needed), it's an efficient way to process that offers more functionality than most online services currently out there, but this version will need much more development to make it into a viable integrated package. ■

Costs and specification

The processing service costs £995 per month, with no set-up fee. Beyond that, only royalties are charged per hit. Any bespoke or other processing work requiring staff time is payable at standard rates. The analysis service charges a negotiable set-up and monthly refresh fee depending on requirements.

Initial training is available. The service will work with most Java-enabled browsers and a high bandwidth Internet connection is needed. www.sdm.co.uk

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