

# State of the 'black art'

**Just how accessible should list managers' websites be when it comes to browsing for ratecards? SALLY HOOTON asked webmasters ROB and AL CAIN to untangle the mysteries of the 'net – and the idea for a survey was born.**

**P**ICTURE THE SCENE: A client, who operates out of New York, calls his marketer to say: "I am pricing up a campaign to sell a brand of sparrow-flavoured catfood into the UK and mainland Europe. Find me a list of potential buyers. Today."

Pre-Internet, this might have caused headaches in terms of immediacy and international time differentials. But now, accessing list brokers' websites to find viable data in real time is a breeze.

Isn't it?

The list broker may well say that his/her advice is essential in choosing the right list – and ratecards posted onto the site are merely guidelines to be discussed further, in person.

But, say we are just doing some initial browsing... is it a straightforward information-gathering exercise achieved at the click of the mouse?

Or are brokers' websites frustratingly difficult to navigate?

And, as a result, are some brokers missing out on early enquiries because their list pages simply don't stand up to scrutiny?

## Independent experts

In this, the first of a summer special spotlighting list brokers online

– concluding with a web survey next month – I asked independent experts how brokers should present their wares in order to tick all the right boxes for those seeking lists via the 'net. UK,



Webmaster brothers,  
Rob (left) and Al Cain..

Surrey-based brothers **Al and Rob Cain** – co-directors of Systemcore Ltd – are Internet consultants critically involved with the technical implementation of

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e-business, web publication and promotional campaigning.

The Cains removed some of the 'smoke and mirrors' surrounding the 'black art' of Internet expertise, introduced some important conceptual language and described the evolution of the 'net in terms of how direct marketers can make the most of it.

Al began: "Since its inception, the Internet has changed radically in its technical capability. Not too many years ago, designers simply had to master a few lines of mark-up code and could charge six-figure sums for building the early corporate sites.

"No more. Websites are now able to handle complex information from distributed databases, integrate with software applications, provide high security, personalisation and real-time trading transactions."

## Lost in the ether

But are providers getting lost in the ether? A quick Google search (from among its eight billion indexed pages) for 'direct marketing lists' revealed 15 million page matches – more than three-quarters of a million in the UK alone.

Rob continued: "In order to get into the top few pages of the Google

search engine, companies have to know how to use sponsored entries, meta-data (keywords used by the search engines), site-linking and other promotional strategies.

"The Internet pulls into focus the whole area of information interchange – what you can now do electronically, machine to machine, and importantly what is still best left to humans, face to face. Increasingly, the 'black' is being taken out of the 'black art' of pretty much every subject, Internet technology and mass marketing are no exceptions: the tendency is to reduce everything to a set of readily acquirable techniques; unbundling soft consultancy services from hard technical process."

### Marketing channels

The Cains point out that new devices, new media formats and new data appear daily, defining ever more extensive and complex marketing channels.

Al said: "Adding geo-temporal, predictive profiling, and other 'connected' data to the mix, makes even more precise targeting possible; whether you are selling insurance policies to organic

farmers, ring tones or ice-cream.

"The increase in scale that connectivity brings means we must continue to improve the selectivity of our interfaces with online data, drilling down to relevant detail and filtering out irrelevant noise."

Rob added: "Accessibility is another catch-all label; whether or not a website provides international language support, cross-browser compatibility – and ultimately whether it can be 'comprehended' and acted upon by anyone via any device, anywhere.

"This is an area affecting the consumer industry, the bedrock of direct marketing, more than any other sector save public services."

Then there is compliance, said Al, potentially a technical minefield: "Functions surround our data such as the 'opt-in' function, privacy and 'legal provenance' over 'licenced rights'. Providers and users are presented with increasing technical and commercial complexity that must be treated seriously."

### Internet language

Standardisation is at the heart of many of these subjects – a standard example being XML, or extended markup language.

Rob explained: "More than just another Internet programming language, XML is the meta-language-glue that ultimately holds all of the content and data of the Internet together and allows different systems to communicate about the same subject.

"New XML variants are continually being developed by different industries and significant benefits are delivered, especially within the B2B community."

Another word used in the web world that the uninitiated among us might stumble over is 'taxonomy'. But the Cains told me that the way in which information is structured and referenced is a defining and critical aspect of publications in general, and web-born data especially.

Al said: "It is not just about presentation. Getting the design of the data itself right, keeping practical usage and, importantly, usefulness is a top priority."

Rob added: "Analytics is another key area where immense value can be derived from data using software and services. Precision, accuracy and

completeness are fundamental attributes of knowledge, and knowledge means power; as we all know.

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Leaving aside the rocket science involved, there's a lot that can be achieved online at a basic level, the Cains told me, simply through use of good website design.

Here's their top tips:

- Implementing a simple database to returning data in response to structured user queries;
- Providing helpful clear and concise content in a well structured and easy to read style;
- The availability of software tools and specialised online services, such as data-conditioning and preference list screening.

Rob said: "With these, users perceive greater value in their experience of a site and get a better impression of a company's attitude towards customer service.

### Our survey begins

These are just some of the underlying drivers behind the machine that is rapidly becoming the DM market online.

Over the next few days, the Cains and I will be visiting the websites of a variety of well-known international list provision companies – chosen at random – and checking out their ease of accessibility, particularly looking at ways they might improve their service. We will ask, what should customers expect from this evolving sector, given the current state-of-the-art of the Internet and their own increasingly sophisticated demands?

And, in next month's issue of *DMI*, we will report back on the results of our survey, single out our favourites and discuss how the best of the DM online list providers are responding to these issues in the flesh, right now.

- Next month, we reveal the results of our website survey.

### The companies whose websites we are now reviewing are:

Acxes Data – UK  
 AZ Direct – Germany  
 Electric Marketing – UK  
 EuroContactPool – Sweden  
 DBI – France  
 Dennis Lists – UK  
 Direct Media International – US  
 Evolution – US/UK  
 Informadata – UK  
 JR Direct – US  
 Lloyd James – UK  
 Mardev – UK/US  
 Market Monitor – UK  
 Marketing File – UK  
 Mokrynski – US  
 Par SE – Sweden  
 PMI – Ireland  
 Prospect Swetenhams – UK  
 RSA Direct – UK  
 Schober – Germany  
 Uni-Marketing – UK  
 World Innovators – US  
 Wyvern Direct – UK  
 I Stop Data – UK