

PRODUCT OF THE WEEK

The Software Bureau Cygnus

Good data management is vital for printers looking to offer a wide range of services, says Philip Chadwick

The changing face of direct mail has meant that printers who operate in the sector have had to raise their game. While it may have become a bit of a cliché, firms are increasingly having to offer more than just ink on paper, especially as campaigns are becoming ever more personalised. Data handling is now the name of the game and more printers are bringing the service in-house.

But as with anything linked to data, the chances of getting it wrong are high. The industry is frequently slammed for inaccurate data use, which leads to misspelled names and incorrect addresses. This in turn can be very costly to a brand – it damages the client's reputation and costs money.

With this in mind, The Software Bureau has developed Cygnus. At its simplest, the product is data processing software that can filter out strange-sounding names and duplicate addresses. It should be a good time for the product with increasing numbers of printers investing heavily in software that can make data handling smoother and faster.

"It's very much a direct mail product and it was conceived for that market," explains The Software Bureau's client services director Mark Dobson. "It's about incorporating best practice into a business. It identifies records that have certain characteristics such as invalid postcodes and blank spaces where names should be. It can also check for obscure words and even celebrity names."

Born out of print

Dobson and the rest of the team at The Software Bureau, have bags of experience in this area. They've all worked at the print coalface over the years, for the likes of Aldwyn (which later became Vertis) and DPS (now part of Stralfors), where the product first took shape. The first version of Cygnus was released in 2001 and it was under development for three years prior to that. The current version is 2.64.

This print experience stood the company in good stead when it came to developing Cygnus and understanding the demands of the DM market, according to Dobson. "Our background is in DM, which is why it has gone down well in that market. We have some quite big mailing houses as clients and we're also growing in the print management sector."

The Software Bureau has managed to win over some big hitters in the direct mail production sector. Lateral Group, MetroMail, GI Group, Formpro MM and the North East

Mailing Centre (NEMC) are just a few of the firms that have invested in Cygnus. On top of that print management companies Williams Lea, HH Associates, Etrinsic and Charterhouse have also installed the product.

Since its launch, the product has evolved greatly and the latest edition does more than simply clean up names and addresses. The Software Bureau call it a 'bureau in a box' – it gives the user control over their clients' data and allows users to clean, de-dupe and suppress data. Cygnus includes suppression files, including Mortascreen, Disconnect, ReConnect, The Bereavement Register, GAS and MPS. These files can be accessed without needing any additional contractual agreements or incurring additional costs.

Dobson says that users don't have to be technically minded. While a knowledge of data handling is useful, you don't have to be a programmer to operate Cygnus.

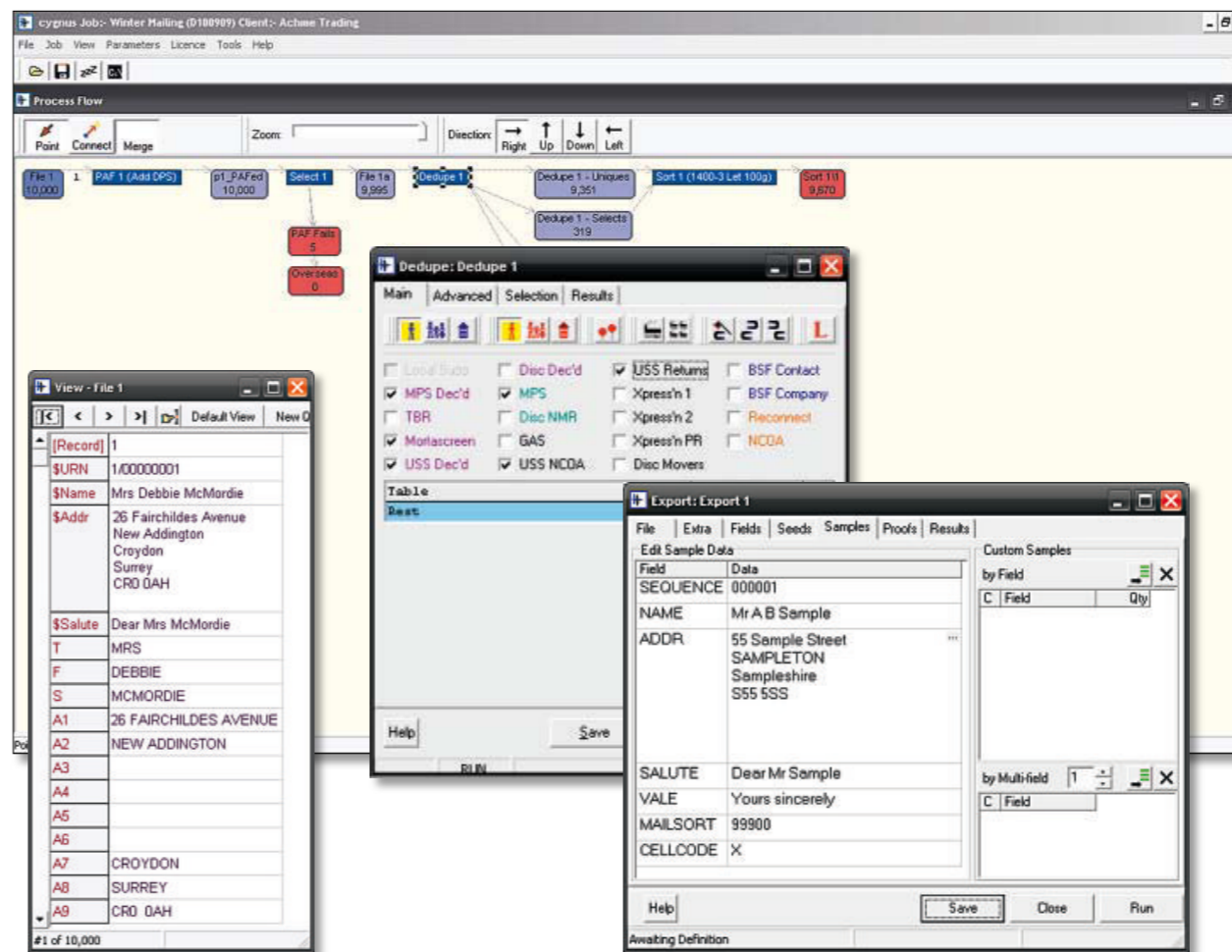
The product offers several features and modules. De-duplication allows a user to remove duplicate names and addresses from the database, while the suppression feature allows the removal of names and addresses of consumers who have moved, died or opted out of DM; this is where the incorporation of suppression files comes in. The Post Office Address File (PAF) enables a user to update an address at a variety of levels, from simply validating a postcode to fully enhancing an address.

"Duplicated addresses are a waste of money," explains Dobson. "If you end up mailing these records then you are spending a lot and then there is also the damage to your brand as well as the damage it causes to the industry as a whole. It isn't a difficult process to run a de-dupe. It's allowing a print company to take control of their own data. It helps them to understand their customer and allows them to effectively design the whole campaign."

Cygnus also incorporates postal sorts. Data can be sorted and the software can also provide statistical reports and listings as well as generating final bag label files. It's also here where the software can find the best value downstream postal discount schemes. TNT Sort, DHL and UK Mail are the accredited postal operators for the product.

"All the prices are built into the software," adds Dobson. "The cheapest options are available for users to consider."

The latest update has also embedded Royal Mail's National Change of Address (NCOA) file. According to The Software



Cygnus has powerful de-duping, suppression and data sifting functions

SPECIFICATIONS

Description	Data processing software
Platforms	PC/MS Windows
Usage models	Licensed
Price	from £10,000
Contact	The Software Bureau 0870 735 9536 www.thesoftwarebureau.com

Bureau, Cygnus is one of the first applications to offer print houses a "pre-approved NCOA solution". The supplier adds that previously, companies had to go through a stringent and expensive security audit prior to accessing the file.

But with Cygnus, you can simply take your file and run it against NCOA, explains Dobson. "It then shows all the matches and any new addresses are returned instantly."

Cost savings

The upside of this, as David Murray, The Software Bureau's sales director explains, is that "end-users, mailing houses and charities will now be able to process their data against the NCOA file without having to go through a lengthy and costly security audit, saving customers thousands of pounds."

The Royal Mail provides a redirection service to members of the public who wish to have mail forwarded to a new address and this NCOA file contains 15m records taken from the redirection database. It's this kind of feature that The Software Bureau believes will help the DM industry to prevent inaccurate data from slipping through the net.

"Cygnus does a lot of things as a matter of course," says Dobson. "Colour-coded icons show that certain modules have been completed. The product is about filtering the data and fixing problems – getting the data clean and ready. Once through that you can move on to preparing to produce the output files. Anything done manually can go wrong but unless the wrong information is typed in from the start, then there are lots of automated checks and balances in place. There are plenty of safety nets."

And not just for duplicate addresses. Often, negative news paper stories about DM relate to instances where offensive names have been sent to customers. Cygnus sifts through the data and flags up any slang or swear words.

Other modules include Splerge, where data can be split and merged to suit an individual client's requirements and Match, which enables the user to perform standard tasks such as consolidating multiple records to one appended output record. In total, Cygnus can process files containing 70m records, although Dobson adds that such a high number is rare and it very much depends on how much computing power a company has. Just as importantly, preparing data for a campaign can take as little as eight minutes to complete.

With this speed capability and attention to detail, it's no surprise that Dobson believes that Cygnus will suit DM printers that have taken much if not all of their clients' data handling in-house.

So far, The Software Bureau has around 60 customers and Cygnus can be tailored to an individual firm's needs, according to Dobson. Training is available if the user needs it and Dobson says that he and the other directors spend time with customers to ensure that the product is running smoothly.

That The Software Bureau is picking up customers in the DM sector suggests that print firms are now considering themselves more as technology providers than simply ink-on-paper printers. And if more take the handling of data seriously, then there is a chance that the days of inaccurate names and addresses could draw to an end, which would be good news for the reputation of the DM industry. ■