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Do you love Sunday papers? Times may know

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For decades, The Seattle Times Co. solicited subscribers for its Sunday newspaper edition the old-fashioned way: by stuffing mailboxes with ads and filling phone lines with telemarketing pitches.

But today, thanks to cutting-edge data technologies offered by a new breed of marketing firms, the company starts with a vast spreadsheet that measures everything from how often you go online to whether you own or rent your house to your estimated household income based on the neighborhood you live in. With all this calculated the company then mathematically determined what part of the Times will appeal to you.

Are you female, college educated, a consumer of both print and online news, age 18 to 34, online for more than 20 hours a week, and a regular weekend newspaper reader? Do you feel it's important to be well-informed and have the latest breaking news? If so, you fit into the market segment The Times dubs "Net and Newspapers," which will receive ads touting both The Sunday Times and online paper.

The new, more-powerful data programs are aimed at raising subscription levels even while saving money by cutting down drastically on the number of solicitations the company must make. For newspapers, which are faced with growing competition for readers and ever tightening budgets, data crunching is highly appealing.

"It makes a lot of sense," said Martin Schneider, an analyst with New York-based The 451 Group. "By reaching out to the customers who are more likely to subscribe, you aren't throwing around money."

The Seattle Times Co. recently hired Seattle-based Apollo Data Technologies to combine a database of Puget Sound area

residents with surveys on reader behavior and interest. The computer system can create a profile for a typical reader group, and when new data comes in, it updates marketing plans automatically.

"We want to better understand our current subscribers and better customize our marketing efforts to non-subscribers," said Janet Fairness, strategic research manager at The Seattle Times Co.

Until recently, advanced statistical software was hard to use and aimed mainly at sophisticated statisticians, said Jeff Kaplan, principal at Apollo. More recent computer programs are directed at the average marketer.

Newspapers are more likely to use the software now because it has become cheaper and simpler, Schneider said. Media companies typically have smaller margins and less money for investments than other industries, said Kaplan and Schneider.

The use of advanced statistical software, or predictive analytics, is growing at 7 percent to 14 percent a year, said Lou Agosta, senior analyst with Forrester Research. Another indicator of the area's growing prominence: analyst firm International Data Group recently broke out predictive analyses into its own sector. Kaplan said Apollo saw 100 percent sales growth from 2003 to 2004. Apollo is working primarily with mid-size and large companies in the media, retail and consumer goods markets, and customers include Microsoft and Barnes and Noble.

The Seattle Times project used a data-base of all households in King, Snohomish, Kitsap and Pierce Counties, local demo-graphic data and a Times survey of King County non-subscribers and subscribers.

Instead of targeting an entire household with a single type of marketing material,

The Times will be able to identify individual potential subscribers within the household. One home, for instance, could have a weekend newspaper reader and an Internet news reader, each of whom would receive different pitches.

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The Seattle Times Co. isn't the only media organization interested in predictive analytics. Apollo is also in discussions with another large media company. Since no deals have been made, Kaplan declined to give the company's name but said it owns around 50 newspapers and has a close relationship with The Times.

"They saw what The Times has done and want to roll it out with their newspapers," Kaplan said.

Arden Dickey, executive vice president of circulation for San Jose-based media conglomerate Knight-Ridder Inc., said the company has talked to a couple of vendors about doing more with computer data analysis.

"We're not currently doing nearly as much of that at Knight-Ridder as we'd like to," Dickey said.

One newspaper with a system already up and running is The Milwaukee Journal Sentinel, which worked with Group 1 Software Inc. to analyze subscriber and non-subscriber demographics.

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