Blocking unwanted spam, verifying users

TrustFabric, based in Cape Town, recently launched TrustFabric Connect, a do-not-contact list that lets individuals opt-out of direct marketing, makes it easy for businesses to comply with legislation protecting customer rights and update existing customers .

The system lets users control how businesses are allowed to contact them via email, phone, text message and snail mail.

The Consumer Protection Act, which came into effect on 1 April this year, states that consumers are entitled to refuse direct marketing. It defines a pre-emptive block registry where people can opt-out of direct marketing.

Irresponsible direct marketing is a problem, especially SMS marketing where an opt-out reply costs money. Very little has been done to address the problem so far. The Direct Marketing Association of SA's (DMASA) "do not contact" database was recently reported as leaked, exposing around 40 000 people to identity theft risks. Its database, which contained ID numbers, was regularly sent out as a spreadsheet containing contact details in plain text.

"We've had just over 100 users sign up in the first week," says Joe Botha, CEO of TrustFabric.

According to the company, the system differs from other opt-out services in a few ways - users only share the details they want to, no ID number is required. Details are kept secure and strong encryption is used. It understands relationships between businesses and individuals.

Value for business

The service offers businesses regulatory compliance and better data quality. Most opt-out services are blunt instruments, offering no value to businesses. This provides businesses with verified up to date contact details for their customers.

"We're very happy with the response from businesses, as 11 businesses signed up in the first week after we launched, including Skyrove, Lexus Helderberg and CITi," adds Botha.

Most businesses have customer databases which are out of date. One of the major banks has 22 million customer records, but only 4 million active customers, as each business unit maintains its own customer database. The company offers businesses a way to link customer records to people again.

How businesses manage personal information will become critical, when the Protection of Personal Information Bill becomes law later this year.

System

Individuals create a TrustFabric Connect account, then enter an email address and mobile phone number. The company verifies these details and lets users configure their communication preferences. Businesses create an account and upload encrypted versions of email addresses and mobile phone numbers from their existing customer database. When a match is found, on email address or phone number, the system will prompt individuals to confirm a business relationship and enable sharing of up to date contact information. This builds a fine grained fabric of business relationships.

Businesses query the service to see which customers have confirmed a business relationship and have given permission to be contacted.

Users get a list of their active business relationships and a dashboard to manage their business communication. They can conveniently update their details in one place and linked businesses will receive their new details.

Businesses get a verified up to date opt-in list. The company always acts as an independent 3rd party, never sharing contact details unless a business relationship has been confirmed.

The service is free for individuals, small businesses and educational institutions but has a charge for business users

"We have set a target of 150 000 users for the next year. That might be a bit optimistic, but I suspect we are providing a solution to a real problem. Something which has been overlooked for far too long," concludes Botha.

For more information, go to www.trustfabric.com/connect