Feature Article: Lexis Nexis on Trial: a report on findings

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Introduction

Running an alerts team in a library serving a community of around 7,000, with some 500 searches running daily, I provided my team with access to online news aggregator databases, to facilitate the distribution of news on a daily basis. Our chosen suppliers were Factiva, Thomson Business Intelligence Services and Dialog.

Using Factiva on a daily basis for intense information retrieval, we found there were several major flaws causing problems with its usability. The quality of the indexing was poor, and the changes Factiva made to the interface at the end of 2005, which made the system impossible for us to use on our desktop PCs, were not dealt with for over three months. Because of these problems, I suggested to the Chief Librarian that we should trial an alternative, Lexis Nexis. The trial was approved, so I set out to ensure that it was as fair, objective and comprehensive as possible.

The Trial

Due to the scale of information retrieval we were hoping to achieve, we were provided with an extended six-week trial, as opposed to the normal one to four weeks. The estimated overall time spent on the trial was around100 hours. I outlined the key needs we would measure each supplier against:

1) Delivery methods

2) Ease of access

3) Ease of analysing relevance of articles

4) Ease of creating alerts

5) Accuracy of searches in terms of relevance

6) Proficiency of the indexing

7) Suitability for our needs overall

8) Time scales to do similar tasks

9) Cost-effectiveness

Their performance would be measured against these specifications once the trial had finished, but it was important that the trial was also performed objectively. I devised a trial that would ensure as little bias as possible.

The purpose of the trial was to compare the performance of Factiva and Lexis Nexis. As an established vendor, Thomson Business Intelligence was included as an informal comparison, and to provide an additional opportunity to contrast Factiva's performance. The trial involved careful selection of those alerts to be used on Lexis Nexis:

1) 40 alerts to be on Lexis Nexis in total

2) Ten alerts to be set up on the third supplier as well as Lexis Nexis and where it originates from (e.g. alerts from Factiva set up on Lexis also to be set up on Thomson for full comparison)

3) Subject areas of companies, equipment, defence news and management issues to have ten alerts each

4) Company and Equipment alerts would be split into two groups, to cover large and small companies, and individual pieces of equipment and types of equipment.

Methods

Daily checks of the results were made on all 40 alerts, noting the number of articles retrieved, and the number judged to be relevant. This then provided a relevant retrieval rate. The same person

reviewed the results on a daily basis for each search from all three suppliers, to ensure consistency across suppliers.

Once a week there were printouts of all articles retrieved from the ten alerts on all three suppliers. The printouts were done on the ten alerts repeated on all suppliers, to reduce the workload, and were then analysed by comparing which articles were present or not present from each supplier, to make a direct article comparison rather than just the retrieval rate.

This set of results showed how many unique articles there were for each supplier, and how many suppliers had an article missing, as well as how consistent the results were across all suppliers.

The Results

There were different areas of information covered by the chosen methods. These were:

1) The retrieval rate. This measured the number of relevant articles against the number of articles retrieved (see fig. 1)
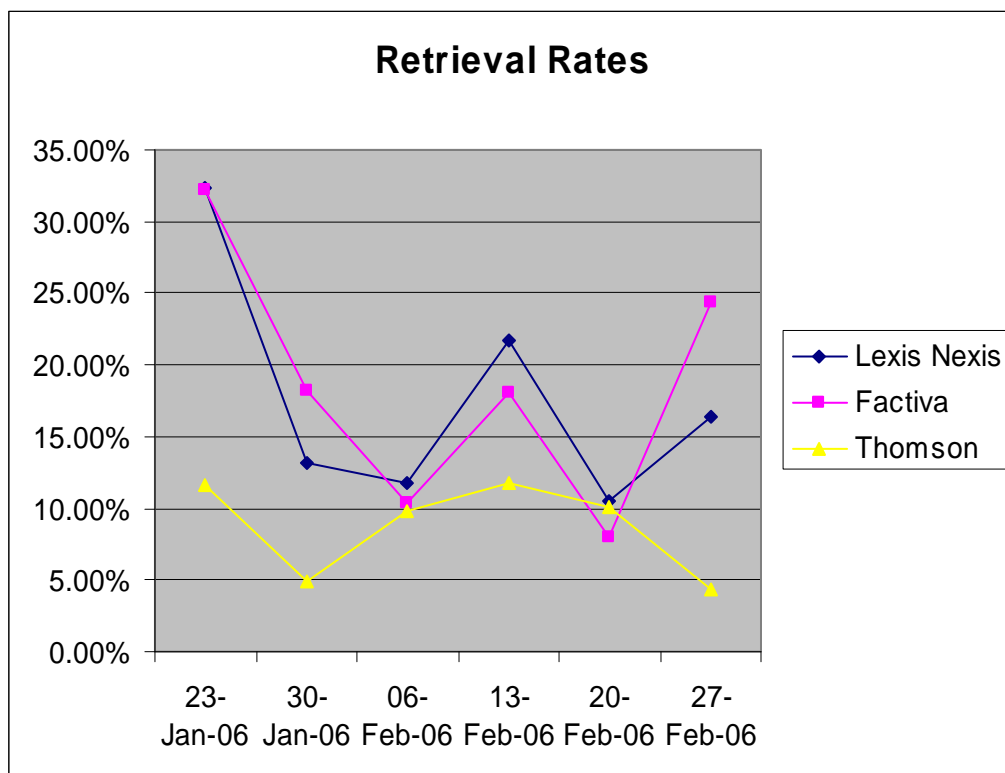
Figure 1 Retrieval Rates

2) The number of articles in all suppliers. This came to 22 across all weeks.
3) The number of unique articles. This was the number of articles that were in one supplier's results and no other, e.g. in Thomson but not Factiva or Lexis Nexis (see fig. 2 and 3)
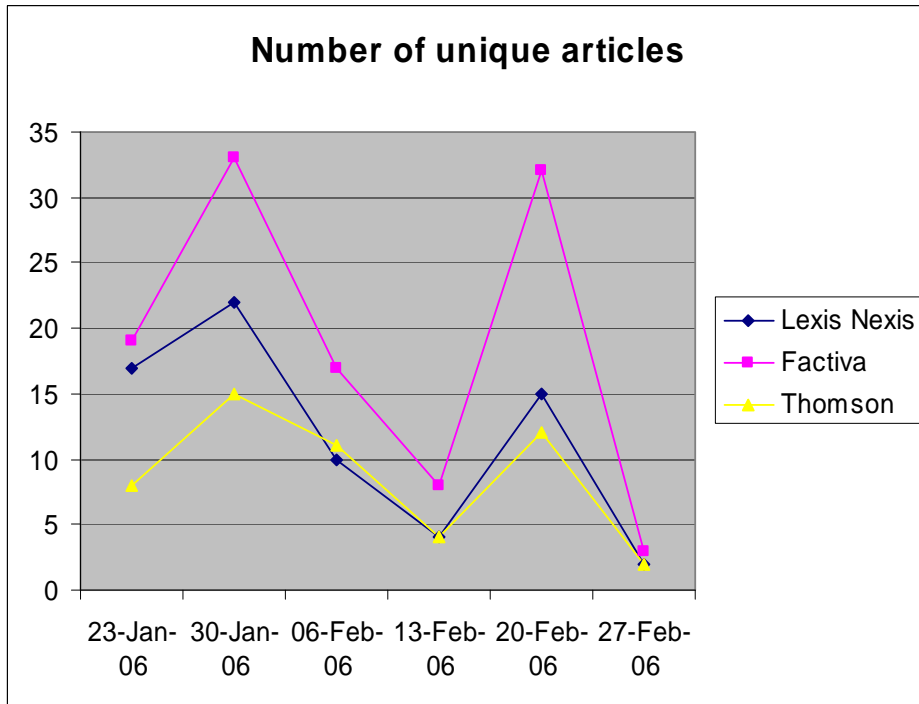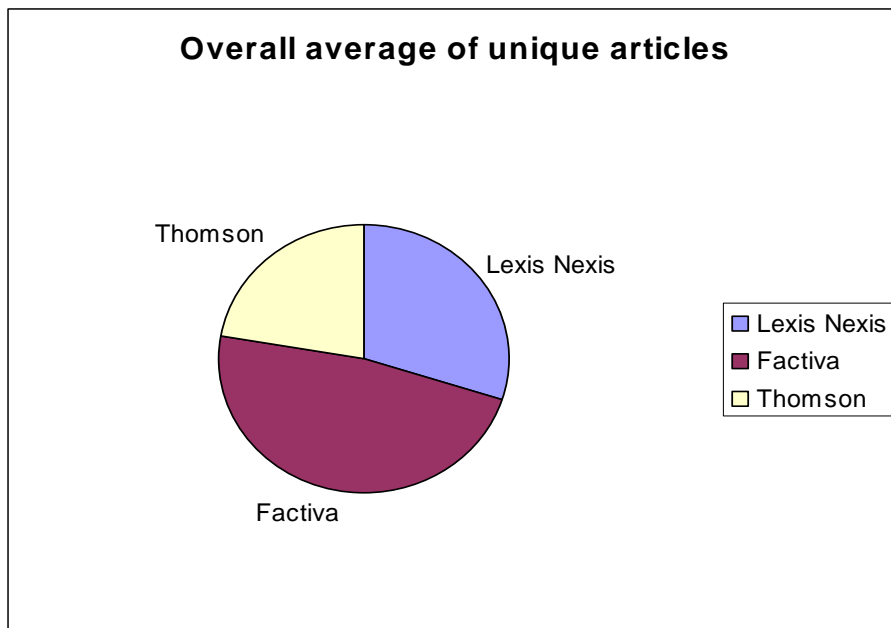
Figure 2 Number of unique articles

Figure 3 Overall average of unique articles

4) The number of missing articles. This was the number of articles that were in both other suppliers' results, but not in that one, e.g. in Factiva and Lexis Nexis but not Thomson (see fig. 4 and 5):
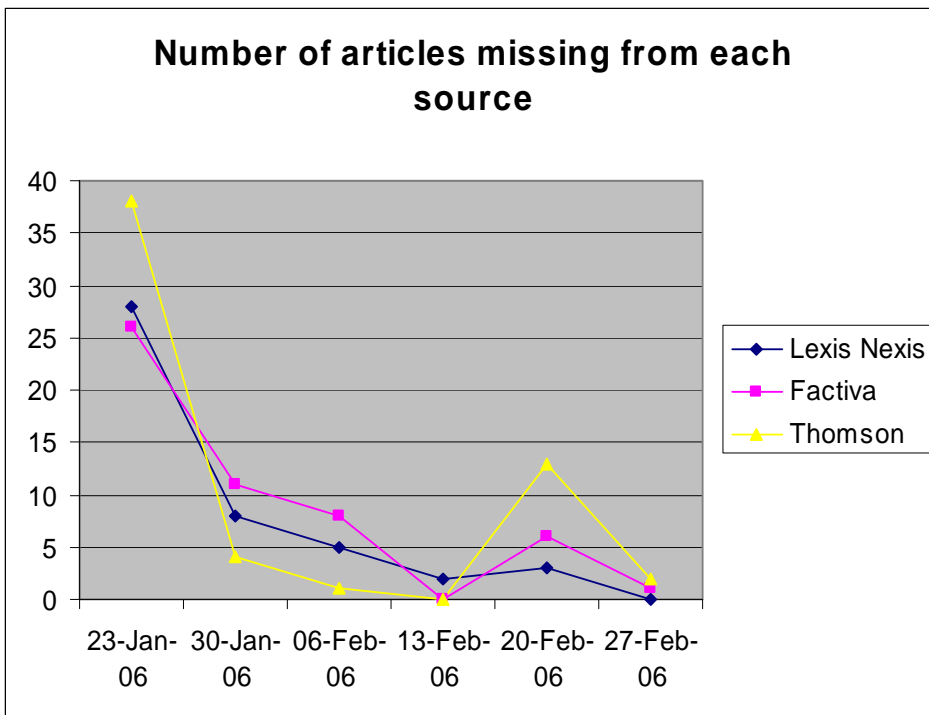
Number of articles missing from each source

Figure 4 Number of articles missing from each source

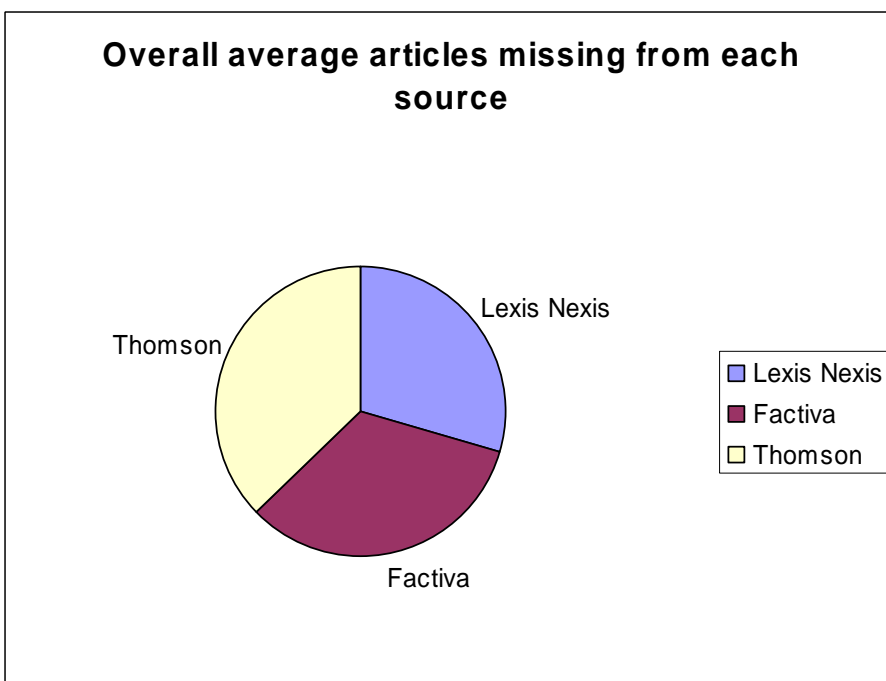**Overall average articles missing from each source**

Figure 5 Overall articles missing from each source

The most notable facts to come out of the trial are as follows:

1) Factiva had the highest retrieval rate overall, and Thomson the lowest.

2) Factiva had one week with the lowest retrieval rate.

3) The searches on Factiva have been running for years, with many opportunities to tweak them into performing better; in contrast, Lexis Nexis searches were set up in one week.

4) Factiva had the most unique, but that would have been influenced by Thomson's poor performance and the need to improve the Lexis Nexis searches (see (7) below).

5) Lexis Nexis was the most consistent performer, with most weeks the highest retrieval rate.

6) Lexis Nexis had most in common with the others.

7) Towards the end of the trial a search on Lexis Nexis found articles that had not been retrieved. This suggests that the searching hampered the results.

8) Thomson had the most missing and fewest unique, the poorest performer by far.

9) Thomson costs, service and functionality from their system were satisfactory, but their results were concerning, so the problem will be discussed with them in the hope of improving performance.

The results of the trial in response to our key needs have been as follows from Factiva and LexisNexis:

1) Delivery method. Both similar – provide access online and through an e-mail system.

2) Ease of access.

   a) Lexis Nexis has a simple interface for both searching and alert functionality.

   b) Factiva has a simple search interface, but the alert system is very difficult to understand and operate.

   c) Lexis Nexis seemed to have no problems with access at the time of the trial.

   d) Factiva had to be access on a stand-alone PC at the time of the trial, as the site was inaccessible from our desktops.

3) Ease of analysing relevance of articles.

   a) Lexis Nexis allowed us to choose whether we had the opening lines or the Key Word in Context (KWIC) of the search terms in our results.

   b) Factiva only provides the opening lines.

   c) There are benefits to having KWIC, such as seeing the number of occurrences, but it is not valid if only index terms are used in the search, as it relies on keywords.

4) Ease of creating alerts.

   a) Lexis Nexis had a simple way of setting up alerts, and an easy-to-navigate menu for managing them once they are created.

   b) Factiva has a complex set of areas where things are stored, and it is possible to lose things. You have to create an alert, then store it in the right place, then copy it to the right area, then move it into the right position alphabetically. For this reason, it is also difficult for anyone but the usual administrator to do this work.

5) Accuracy of searches in terms of relevance. Both were very similar in this area at this point, but it is important to remember that Lexis Nexis should perform better when the searches have been tweaked after time on the database.

6) Proficiency of the indexing.

   a) Lexis Nexis performed disappointingly in the company searches, but this seemed to be because we used the "relevance indexing" feature, which was later found to be excluding information we would have counted as being relevant. This was Lexis Nexis' only flaw in its indexing, as far as I could see.

   b) Factiva has substantial problems with its indexing, and that is one of the reasons that this trial was initiated. Lexis Nexis proved to be far superior in this area. One example of Factiva's problems was when a search with the index term "Computer Software" and the free text term "java" was performed, the majority of results were on the Indonesian island, or the coffee beans

7) Suitability for our needs overall.

   a) Lexis Nexis performed well in all aspects of the trial, including that of customer service.

b) Factiva was not suitable for us any longer, and that is why the trial was initiated. The product is too flawed, and customer service only became involved when they wanted to sell us something more expensive.

Time scales to do similar tasks

When the trial was started the time taken by it was so great that I decided not to keep records on this, as it would detract from our other work even further.

Cost effectiveness

The current costs of each product were very similar, and they would be providing similar levels of amounts downloaded, but there are additional aspects that have a bearing on the decision:

- Lexis Nexis were extremely responsive. When I suggested there were some areas that I felt they could improve, the product development manager contacted me to gain my opinions, and they were quick to respond if I had any questions or issues that needed dealing with. Of course, they were trying to sell their product at this point, and we do not know what their after-care service is like.

- Factiva very rarely had any contact with us, and my experience of contacting them with questions or issues was poor. Customer services representatives offered very little assistance, and I found they are actually unwilling to provide advice. When as a result of our firewall we could not access the site from our desktops, the initial response seemed to imply that the problem was at our end, and that we should sort it out ourselves. Unfortunately, the size and nature of the organisation meant that there was no room to make exceptions and change the system set-up on certain computers, so this was not an option.

Conclusions

The performances of Lexis Nexis and Factiva were very similar. Thomson was not involved in the trial to have their contract decided on, so it was only between these two. I also decided to pass over their poor performance, as there are a number of recommendations that I have made to them which will be introduced, and which should improve the performance of the searching. The primary difference will allow index terms to be used in the free text box, which will bring it in line with the others. As this is the main difference between the suppliers, this could account for the vastly differing performance. I have also found that the customer service is of such high level, that this is a strong inducement to stay with them.

There were several details that made the decision about who to award the contact fairly easy: Lexis Nexis was more reliable overall; Factiva's indexing and customer service and support were of little benefit to the service; Lexis Nexis is a far simpler service to use, with the methods for creating and managing alerts being far easier to use; Factiva have little consideration for us, with the database being inaccessible for three months.

Recommendations

The general overall performance and customer relations from Factiva, lead me to recommend that the contract be moved to Lexis Nexis.

Suppliers' Responses

The three suppliers will be contacted in order to obtain their responses to these results.