

# Software Review

## *Uncle tabulation software*

By Tim Macer

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Comparing traditional batch-style crosstab packages with the latest generation of end-user interactive tabulation solutions tended to be like telling the tale of the tortoise and the hare. Interactive tab packages are strong on quick results, but short on the versatility and reliability of their more lumbering batch counterparts. During last year, Uncle graduated from being a command-line DOS-style program to full 32-bit Windows app with a kind of hybrid interface that is part hare and part tortoise.

As you would expect from a package 26 years in the making, Uncle will allow you to produce just about any table you want, in any style you want, from data originating from all the typical marketing research sources. Uncle is neither a data collection nor a data

entry tool. You must start with a file containing the data. Several packages, including Ronin and Voxco, will export the data and associated text definitions ready to load into Uncle.

Once Uncle has its hands on the data, it offers heavy-duty support for editing and cleaning, filtering and weighting, and it handles continuous data admirably. It also allows you to make multiple passes on the data file, so you can also “manipulate” results to produce index values, norms, means of means and so on.

An Uncle table is built up as a separate set of definitions for the banner and the stubs. Once defined, these can be reused independently in other tables, saving effort and error. Stubs are built up line by line, specifying texts, definitions and options as a series of single letters or abbreviations in a flexible though, to the new user, somewhat bewildering way.

### **Wealth of tools**

The biggest shake-up in the new ver-

sion is that all of this is carried out in the new Uncle Editor, which provides a more interactive environment for the user to work in, and a wealth of tools to make writing the commands more productive. Syntax is color-coded and a toolbar provides immediate access to cut and paste (which can also be performed with drag and drop), undo and redo and a very useful spellchecker. More is available on the right mouse button menu, and if that is not enough, you can program hot keys with your favorite commands.

The real advantage of this approach is its immediacy. Exiting from the editor, you can run the tables immediately and they will appear either in the same syntax window or in a separate output window. This direct feedback means you know if you are on the right track when defining something complicated, yet everything you enter is saved for you to modify, re-run, or repeat at a later date.

Sadly, table publishing facilities are still somewhat neglected in Uncle. There are some useful options to include some histograms and charts in tables, but don't expect to put together a complete presentation from these. Exports to Word and Excel will save you having to type in data again, but

### **Uncle tabulation software from The Uncle Group ([www.unclegroup.com](http://www.unclegroup.com))**

#### **Pros**

- Fast and efficient to use
- Good online help
- Flexible: any table any way you want

#### **Cons**

- Steep learning curve
- Still a lot of cryptic syntax to learn
- Table-publishing options limited

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without the ability to influence layout or styles, they do not provide a viable means to publish results electronically. Perhaps these will come along with the improvements Uncle Group is planning with the introduction of a new end-user table viewer program, and improved Excel support.

### Been a 'lifesaver'

I spoke with two users who had recently opted for Uncle. Holly Brannon founded Holly Stark Brannon Associates in Saugus, Calif., in 1999 as a means for her to work from home when a disability was making employment difficult for her. Having used several DP packages, she opted for Uncle. "I am not a computer person," she explains. "I have a market research background, but I've been able to pick this up by myself. Uncle has enabled me to work on my own and create a business. It has been a lifesaver."

Brannon is delighted with the new Uncle editor. "I love it," she says. "You can do more in this scrolling window than you could before. It's very easy and user-friendly."


Her favorite improvements include distributions on-screen and improvements in ranking which make it easier to handle open-ended data, plus simplified significance testing. "I've got these down from about 30 minutes to five minutes now," she reports. She reckons the new online help has saved many a call to support, as most questions can be answered on-screen.

Compared to other tab packages, Brannon says, "Maybe the easier things are a bit clunkier, but the difficult things are so much easier. It is very flexible."

Two years ago, when Ken Hartley and Paul Mackiewicz set up CIDR Systems, a Philadelphia data processing and reporting company, the relatively low one-off cost of an Uncle license was a major attraction, says Hartley. "It's easy enough for a novice to use, but powerful enough for an

expert to use and not feel bogged down going through operations that a novice would have to."

Like many data processing professionals, Hartley feels that a full GUI interface can get in the way, and the hybrid approach in Uncle brings the best of both worlds. "I was skeptical there was going to be a Windows version and that everything was going to be point-and-click. I don't like that — it slows me down. But by using both environments you can shave off a fair amount of time on every job."

Both Hartley and Holly Brannon independently estimated it takes about three months to learn Uncle properly, so ease of use is relative in this case, but par for the course. "In a program like this," Hartley says, "you don't get to use all the functions because you don't have clients that want them all at once. But sometimes, when you get the hard jobs, you learn some new things that make the easy jobs even easier!" 

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