
Service Performance Insight

Business Solutions for the Services Sector



SPI-voice – Northern Light

**Northern Light:
SinglePoint**



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Turnkey Content Intelligence Application for One-Stop Search of Primary & Secondary Market Research

Northern Light's SinglePoint is a turnkey, content integration application that delivers single-search, portal-based access to market research and competitive intelligence across diverse primary and secondary sources. Offered in a secure, hosted environment, SinglePoint is customized to serve precise business purposes for each of its Fortune-caliber clients, 10 of whom spoke at length with Service Performance Insight (SPI Research).

The technology marketplace is no stranger to exaggeration and excess of language. So it is that the word “unique” is far more often a hallmark of zeal than it is an accurate descriptor of a product. The irony is that a product or service doesn't need to be unique to be of high value. It just needs to deliver value and do so unambiguously.

As it turns out, however, Northern Light's SinglePoint is in fact unique.

That fact is both the good news and the bad news for Northern Light. For although SinglePoint has functionality and features that no other solution currently offers, the quality of uniqueness is a double-edged sword for a small company with a big idea. It carries the resource-intensive burden of education and differentiation in a market that is drowning in buzzwords.

In this *SPI Research-voice*, Service Performance Insight highlights some key aspects of SinglePoint differentiation using the words of 10 early adopters. Although they did not speak for attribution, SPI Research can state without breach of confidentiality that they are all recognized as prime movers in their industry segments — household names from *Fortune* 500 and the Global 1,000. They are clients because SinglePoint delivers real

value in a solution set that is unavailable anywhere else. They are fans because Northern Light keeps the promises that SinglePoint makes.

Is market research ‘information’ if it never gets found or used?

Most large corporations have market research, competitive insight, and overall market intelligence that come from many different sources. In the case of secondary or syndicated research from analysts such as Gartner and IDC, the license fees are expensive, recurring, and report purchases may be duplicated from department to department. But expense is no guarantee of access or use.

The problem: For the sake of argument and round numbers, let’s say that a company has licensed material from 10 different information vendors: AMR, Burton Group, Factiva, Frost & Sullivan, Ovum, IDC, Gartner, Yankee Group, Forrester, and Current Analysis. Anyone looking for information from these sources would have to log onto an individual site in order to navigate and search by rules that are peculiar to that site. Next site — repeat — but not exactly...

Each site with its own log in, rules of engagement, and search eccentricities may seem intuitive enough at first glance. But multiply that effort by 10 in this example and the seeker is more likely to experience frustration than to find useful information. Settling for the yield from the first few searches, the seeker misses what could be a wealth of utility that potentially lies one more click away.

How big is the haystack?

Unfortunately the problem is not usually as simple as 10 vendor sites. Instead it is usually many licensed vendor sites, plus a world of external sources such as competitor Web sites, trade journals, and news feeds. And just for good measure, add in internal corporate resources. Given the immensity and complexity of the resource landscape, most people will forgo finding the best information because the process of finding it is too time-consuming and cumbersome.

If market information is important to a corporation’s strength — and billions of dollars expended annually suggest that it is — then finding the information is itself a high-impact, high-value function. And that function is SinglePoint’s purpose.

The manager of a high-tech global marketing research function observed, “I think it really comes down to this: Most companies invest a lot of money in information. It can easily be millions. But if you don’t get organized so that people can effectively find it, then you’re not getting the value no matter what you paid. And going in, who knows where the information can be the most effective? So you have to make the process of finding it simple — easy to use and efficient. That’s exactly what Northern Light does for us with SinglePoint.”

The user’s eye view of SinglePoint

With one log-in and the launch of a single search inquiry, SinglePoint users are able to interrogate every document from every available source of content — secondary research, trade journals, news feeds, and internal material — to produce one

comprehensive results list. This feat starts with Northern Light's creation of a content database specific to the market research content an organization owns or licenses.

SinglePoint clients enjoy enterprise-wide access to market intelligence through portals that Northern Light customizes by content set, user interface, and access privilege levels. Most of the portals have the client company's look and feel, frequently sporting internal names such as Report Seeker, E-Research, My Research, and Market Vision.

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Because Northern Light indexes every word of every document, SinglePoint has a basis for normalizing results across sources. So, when SinglePoint subjects the client's content universe to its cutting-edge search and relevance ranking, users get results that have consistent meaning and applicability. Users see and value the power of this search.

As the manager of an international market intelligence group observed, “When you make it easy for people to find what's out there, their appetite for good information grows.”

Intuitive + effective = high adoption rate

The director of Knowledge Management at a major consulting firm agrees, “We wanted to involve the consultants in their own searches — getting them to ask better questions. We wanted to raise their awareness about good sources of information beyond the obvious and well-known Gartner. It has worked out extremely well.

“Our professional secondary researchers were very skeptical. They didn't believe that consultants would use it or that the search capability would be as good or better than the native searches on each vendor site. In fact, there is a very straightforward user interface — very intuitive. We've had to do little or no training whatsoever. And the search is first rate. They're won over.”

In fact, adoption of these strategic portals typically far outstrips original expectations. A Fortune 100 technology Market Intelligence manager chuckled, “At first we thought the primary (maybe the only) users of [SinglePoint] would be marketing. That is so far from the truth. Sales, IT, product management, engineering, finance ... At this time we have usage across all job functions, across all geographies globally.”

The SinglePoint secret sauce: managing the vendors

Any thing that can be indexed can be made part of the content database that Northern Light creates for each of its SinglePoint clients. But, when it comes to indexing secondary or licensed material, the service that Northern Light offers is — according to its clients and with apologies to Master Card — *priceless*.

Northern Light has agreements in place with all of the analyst firms and secondary sources that its clients use today. On a daily basis, the company aggregates, integrates, and indexes all new content from all of the sources. This level of effort is one that no other organization offers and no client organization is ever likely to sustain.

One global manager referring to an earlier run at having his internal IT group develop the concept said, “It was a tremendous effort to get them [IT] to see our vision, much less to implement it. But the biggest roadblock was just managing the vendors. Every vendor has a different set of legal requirements. All those agreements were a tremendous obstacle to IT. Even if I had to do it myself ... I know how to find information, do research, find answers ...not manage contractual obligations.

“It’s amazing how convoluted the terms and conditions are. Northern Light maintains those agreements for us. They have established relations with all the research vendors and they have a track record. If I call up and want to add a new research vendor [to my SinglePoint implementation], Northern Light is usually already there. But if they weren’t, they have an established process for making it happen. I really appreciate that.”

“Where Northern Light excels is in their ability to get licensed access to IDC and Gartner.”

The director of a leading consulting firm said, “Where Northern Light excels is in their ability to get licensed access to IDC and Gartner. We’re coming from a company that has a lot of experience with these vendors and we don’t do it. Northern Light does it all. They update it. It’s turnkey. The key is their relationship with the vendors. It would be prohibitive for us to manage all those relationships. We feel lucky that we ‘fell’ into Northern Light.”

The SinglePoint bonus: turnkey and hosted

“I’m a visionary,” a high tech research manager told SPI Research, “I said, ‘There’s got to be a better way to run this railroad.’ We’d buy one book and everyone wanted to read the same book at the same time. Crazy. I said, ‘We’re an Internet company. Why do we have binders?’ I wanted a vehicle where I could research multiple vendors at one time. It’s a simple concept but a lot more complex to do.

“I went straight to IT. They could build it but managing the work behind the scenes just couldn’t be maintained. It’s not IT’s job and we’re not staffed to handle it. Northern Light is the only game in town. They do it all for us now including hosting. ASP is a good model for us. But a lot of people, if they’re not in market research, they don’t get SinglePoint. They think it’s just a Google thing. They will be walking down a very long and useless path if they head off in that direction.”

As should be expected, Northern Light is proud of its professional hosting facility with all the comforting redundancy, security, ingenuity, and the plain old commonsense hard work that brings a greater than 99.95% uptime. But as one new adopter said, “The beauty of SinglePoint was that we could pretty much bypass IT. They have such stringent systems requirements that it’s almost impossible to get new systems in and up. Northern Light’s ASP model makes those problems disappear.”

One of SinglePoint’s most visible champions said, “[Northern Light] wrote a great piece on the *content factory* — that content is not an application as much as it is a process. Unlike, say, an accounting or email package that gets installed and keeps running,

SinglePoint requires a daily refreshing of content to maintain its value. Everyday, the content has to be aggregated, indexed, and unified. Material flows in from the outside, goes through a series of value-added processing steps to reach the finished product — utterly dependent on outside entities. It's true. Northern Light handles it all."

"If I were going to Google to find Northern Light, I would use 'content integration', 'content normalization', 'content portal' ... Content integration is a service not a technology. It's not IT. IT will never want to do what SinglePoint does. IT can do the front end but no one but Northern Light does custom content integration. Every customer is custom integration. People don't always understand that."

Northern Light CEO David Seuss agrees. "Northern Light has a custom orientation that will make the [SinglePoint] portal exactly what the customer wants it to be, not what's canned, standard, easy, or cheap for us to provide."

Note to IT: "We come in peace."

The companies with whom SPI Research spoke describe Northern Light as a good corporate 'guest', having smooth working relationships with client IT organizations. But some of these clients are also quick to say that it wasn't always an easy start in that direction. It is natural that technologically savvy and competent IT professionals look askance at outside providers until or unless they see the essential synergy between Northern Light and IT.

In the midst of a new SinglePoint implementation rollout, a director of information research at a major technology firm found humor in observing the reactions of internal IT: "We had begun working with our internal IT group to look at bringing in an internal content management system in combination with some in-house development. What we quickly realized was that the effort would have cost hundreds of thousands of dollars and there would be no guarantee that the system would work — or recourse if it didn't. The 'conversation,' although exaggerated, went something like this:

Us: 'Have you done this before?'
IT: 'Well, no. But we've got the technical skills'
Us: 'Okay. How long will it take to get the system rolled out?'
IT: 'Not certain,'
Us: 'Estimate?'
IT: 'We're pretty sure it will be a long time'

"We're doing a soft roll out now with Northern Light — very early stages. I've been surprised at how quickly some of the updates we ask for happen. The hysterical thing is that the IT guy who had opposed us is having a not completely subtle hissy fit at how fast and smoothly this project is rolling out. It's just under three months. He is widely saying that it isn't proven — that it's only been three months. I want to say, 'If it had taken the two years you'd needed, would it be better?' But I don't say anything. I'm just quietly amused and annoyed."

The fact that Northern Light does what no other firm or organization has chosen to do is a specialization that is far outside of IT's expertise. SPI Research predicts that this IT

“No one but Northern Light thinks about the *use* of content.”

group will eventually come to appreciate what Northern Light does to free IT to execute on its own charter. On the ground, the company is a roll-up-your-sleeves partner to IT.

One director explains, “I was impressed by [Northern Light’s] knowledge of information. It’s really deep and practical — not just about technology, but about how information is used. Most search companies know search. And most content companies know content. Very few people understand the way that information is used. Northern Light is right there at the intersection of information content and technology.”

“Their CEO spends a lot of time thinking about the external search process. He needs to position Northern Light as the value added technology partner to the corporate head of market research. When it comes to information content and federation, search firms don’t know or understand. No one but Northern Light thinks about the *use* of content.”

On your mark, get set ... discover

Continuing with the content factory analogy, the logical step after content aggregation and unification is delivery of the product. In this case, the user schedules delivery through a self-service application called “search”.

The challenge here is that search, like beauty, is in the eye of the beholder. No two people use search in exactly the same way. In fact, a single person will use search differently depending on the tasks at hand. As one SinglePoint user said, “There are two kinds of searches: Sometimes I just want to search — browse what’s new like iTunes. Other times I know what I’m looking for but I just don’t know where to find it.”

A director of Global Marketing Research told SPI Research, “I had this concept of people going through a discovery process. You start out saying, ‘I don’t even know what I’m looking for.’ You get closer and closer until you’re at the point where you go, ‘I’m only missing this little piece ...’ So, whatever solution we came up with, would have to be completely general and absolutely precise at the same time depending on where someone is in the discovery process. SinglePoint gives each user the ability to explore data in their own way rather than through the mind of a professional researcher. Great flexibility.”

Northern Light’s search roots run deep. The company has been in operation for 10 years, holds a fundamental patent on clustering search results and has dozens of high profile, custom enterprise search clients. Commenting on SinglePoint’s search capability, one user said, “I tested it by putting in some swear words into the body of our documents and then searching to see if it’s doing full text, and it is. It’s great. The speed and stability is surprising.” He went on to say, “[SinglePoint] exceeded my expectations. Very positive. If I had to call it something other than a portal, I would call it a ‘third arm’, a magical bookstore open 24 hours.”

Northern Light amplifies its search results with *meaning extraction* capability such as that found in its *MI Analyst* component program. Search then moves beyond locating content to uncovering its significance. In this venue, SPI Research sees search as the technology

that powers discovery, with discovery being the intended end product. Hinting at future directions along this line, Northern Light's CEO assures his clients, "You will never outgrow our solution or develop a requirement that we can not meet."

Shares well with others — primary research

SPI Research found an interesting trend regarding access to primary market research in the SinglePoint community. One client uses SinglePoint only for enterprise-wide access to primary research, some only for secondary research, and others for a broad combination of all content sources: internal, secondary sources, and licensed material. A leading telecom firm observed, "Primary research was a key factor in our turning to Northern Light. The ability to integrate internal research, secondary research, and news was what drove the project. We've been through the drill of groups not wanting to share their information. Sure, there are some territory issues at work, but more often it's a case of people being afraid of what others will do with their research. Right from the start there were sharing groups and non-sharing groups. We didn't go after everyone at once."

"We started with certain groups and made certain that they were very well showcased. People discovered — and it's mostly true — that the sharing groups got great corporate visibility. That's a huge carrot for getting people to play nice. Pretty soon marketing people from all over were coming to us saying, 'How can we get more visibility?' In the absence of that visibility, groups realized that their internal customers didn't know what they did. And, if you can't show what you do, you can't show your value."

A market intelligence professional commenting on the type of primary research her firm makes accessible through SinglePoint said, "We offer all kinds of information that would answer business questions without telling what specifically we as a company will do to respond to those issues. That is where we draw the line on primary research. We put it out there so people know it's been done, but we don't share what's being concluded. As I said, [SinglePoint] has become part of the culture. So, over time people have recognized that it is a good place to communicate the fact of their primary research if not the actual details. At least people don't do the same research over. I don't know what percent savings has been produced, but it's got to be big. Very big."

The value of SinglePoint — dollars and \$ense

One of the earliest and most publicly visible adopters of SinglePoint states that first year savings were easily in excess of \$1 million. Savings came from reduced IT and the costs of provisioning and supporting more than 100 independent, redundant intranet sites. She told SPI Research that the savings are ongoing. "The bigger, much bigger savings have come from what we save every year using the better buying power centralization has given us. We don't know the benefit of increased viewing and access. We were collecting success stories like, 'I got this idea from a report I would never otherwise have found and I used it to close a whatever-amount-deal.' Stories like that. But no one was really interested. They didn't have to be convinced. So we stopped collecting them."

Another user stated what was a common theme with SinglePoint clients. “The challenge is do we spend the money on search or on more data? But if we don’t get the maximum return on the research dollars we’ve already spent, what’s the use of buying more data? It’s a slippery slope.”

“...how do we manage that content to get it to the people who can make the best use of it?”

A long time SinglePoint client represented the consensus thinking when he said, “Northern Light has a great pedigree for search and has a first-class capability — for sure. But, for me, that’s not what it’s about. It’s about getting information to where people can find it, see it, and use it. If the steps it takes to find and see and use are difficult for people, then it’s as if we don’t have the information at all. The information might just as well not exist if it doesn’t get used. [Our company] owns a lot of information — a lot. The question is how do we manage that content to get it to the people who can make the best use of it? That’s the value. That’s our mission. That’s what Northern Light helps us to do.”

SPI Research Conclusions

There is irony in the fact that SinglePoint — a solution set that excels at making information accessible — is itself almost invisible in its market. This invisibility exists in spite of the fact that Northern Light has fielded a blue ribbon stable of Fortune 500 and Global 1000 clients. Company and clients alike joke about its being “the best kept secret in high tech,” but the challenge is no joking matter to Northern Light. What’s interesting is that its clients seem to care very much about the company succeeding as well.

As one client manager said, “Northern Light is special. Once someone sees SinglePoint, it’s great. When folks find it, they love it. But they have to find it and that’s hard. It’s a niche that no one else is in but lots of people say they are. They aren’t. It’s ASP, search, portal, market research, and syndicated research management all in one.”

Taking that sentiment a step further, a director at a major technology vendor said, “I’ll tell you, occasionally I have thought of Northern Light and the unique position they’re in. Sometimes I envy them for having that unique position and sometimes I think, ‘How the heck do you get that message across?’ I’ll say this: If a company is not yet serious about getting the value out of their information, they’re not ready for SinglePoint. They’re really not. And there’s nothing Northern Light can do. But if they are ready, they’re not going to find what SinglePoint has anywhere else. There is no head-on competition.”

SPI Research offers no marketing solution to the market transparent Northern Light. What SPI Research does offer is a recommendation to corporations that highly value market intelligence. That recommendation is to look into the SinglePoint offering — especially if that corporation is in the high technology industry. For although SinglePoint’s capabilities are certainly applicable across all verticals, the infrastructure which Northern Light already has in place today is absolutely honed for high tech users.

SPI Research might also recommend that information rich vendors look to partner with Northern Light, to exploit its ecosystem of technology platforms, relationships, and established methodologies. SPI Research can envision numerous, winning business models that could thrive in the partnering air of capitalism.

As a research group that specializes in the impact of technology on knowledge-worker productivity, SPI Research is impressed by the power that SinglePoint puts in the hands of its users. Upon implementation, the solution set offers tactical competitive advantage to knowledge-dependent organizations. But it joins the ranks of strategic asset when it becomes engrained in the culture.