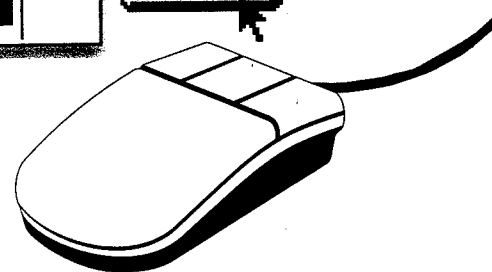# Seek and Ye Shall Find

by Jim Dee, A&WMA Internet Services Manager

" . . . The net has fall'n upon me!
I shall perish under device and practise."

—The Duke of Buckingham in Shakespeare's King Henry VIII *(Act 1, Scene 1)*

Today, one might just as easily attribute that fine quote to an overly dramatic British citizen making a tech-support call to his or her Internet service provider. Likewise, it's not uncommon to feel the Net "fall'n" upon you when you're in need of information and can't find it. So if you're feeling a *royal* need for information lately, read on!

Before signing on as Internet Services Manager for A&WMA, I worked in business development for a Big Five professional services firm. If this fact conjures images of all-expense-paid travel and power lunches at Tavern on the Green, think again! But that's not to say that it lacked some measure of excitement. As the region's primary "information hunter," I was responsible for locating and identifying background information that would generally inform the strategy for pursuing certain engagements. We called this activity "business intelligence"—in the same vein of meaning as the "I" in "CIA." (See, I told you it was exciting.)

While the extensive resources of such an employer make in-depth research a much easier task, profiling companies and people can usually be accomplished for no more money than the cost of an Internet connection. At its core, the Internet *is* information. Indeed, even the now universally recognized acronym, URL—one of the key terms of the Web-savvy—implies the info-centric nature of the Net; URL, after all, stands for Uniform *Resource* Locator. And the resources continue to expand in number with each new domain name registered.

THE SEARCH FOR HATIM

Here's a typical example of the research power of the Internet. Last year, I came across an interesting article in an online business magazine interviewing Hatim Tyabji, then president of Verifone (a financial services giant that is now a part of Hewlett Packard). That article, by the way, can be found at *http://www.fastcompany.com/online/01/vfone.html.* Intrigued by Tyabji's business philosophy, I decided to hunt down his e-mail address so that I could ask him a question. Because most companies probably would not divulge such information over the telephone, I decided to pursue the address using the Internet.

With the goal established, I instinctively decided to try the company's Web site: *www.verifone.com.* Companies with unique-sounding names generally can be found by typing "www.[companyname].com." The same holds true for famous brands: coke.com, budweiser.com, etc. Other entities, such as A&WMA, go with acronyms or other common variants of their company names. In these instances, the Web addresses can generally be found using an Internet search engine. (By the way, Internet branding—with an in-depth discussion of domain names—will be the subject of a subsequent "Using the Internet" column.) In this case, *www.verifone.com* worked fine; the corporate site did not, however, list the e-mail address of its president.

The next step was to try some Internet search engines. Yahoo! and AltaVista have always been my favorites. A Yahoo! search for the string "@verifone.com" proved unfruitful. This was no surprise, as Yahoo! doesn't seem to like non-alphabetic or non-numeric characters.

AltaVista, on the other hand, works well with the ubiquitous "@" symbol. The same search there returned an overwhelming, but manageable, 890 hits. (Note: If you try to re-create this, the actual number of hits may vary from day to day, but it's close to that many.) Judging from the first 10 results—mostly links back to Verifone—it would still be somewhat of a hunt.

It is at this point that the searcher has to consider exactly what he or she is seeking. In this case, it is an indication of how that particular company structures its e-mail accounts. (If I could determine that, I could likely infer the correct address because I know the president's name.) Typically, companies use some combination of initials, names, and possibly dots or underscores. (Still others employ no apparent mechanism.) Try to guess, for instance, which e-mail is correct for our Marketing Department's Frank Moone:

    A. fmoone@awma.org
    B. frank.moone@awma.org
    C. f_moone@awma.org
    D. moonef@awma.org

If you chose A, you're right! (Warning: Frank hates spam!, so please try not to e-mail any unsolicited solicitations to him.) Even if you knew our internal convention, however, you'd still have to make an educated guess and wouldn't be guaranteed success. For instance, if A&WMA were to hire a "Frances Moone," we'd have to come up with a mechanism to address the addressing conflict.

Much to my disappointment, I found examples of several mechanisms in place at Verifone: Last-name-onlys, underscored variations, and even a few I would never have guessed. At this point, though, guessing seemed better than sifting through 800-plus result pages, so I tried searching AltaVista for "hatim@verifone.com." . . .
Nothing. Then "h_tyabji@verifone.com." . . . Nothing. A third permutation, "htyabji@verifone.com" also proved unsuccessful. On a final whim, I tried "hatim_t@verifone.com" . . . and then WHAM! . . . three hits! Mission accomplished.

SPEAKING OF UNDERSCORES . . .

The point of this real-life example relates to the vastness of the Internet in general. Just when you think the information you're seeking does not exist, it may in fact exist in three places (or 30, or 130, etc.). Patience, persistence, and creativity can significantly influence your results, whether it's an e-mail address you're seeking or a list of board members for a local organization. That's not to say, of course, that *all* information is available, but it's certainly more than many people realize.

Honing your Internet search skills better positions you for improved business development, competitive intelligence, and of course basic information awareness. Looking at these three areas, here is a typical example of how improved Internet search skills would benefit you in a given situation. Let's

assume, for this hypothetical example, that your firm, ABC Company, specializes in lead abatement and is participating in a competitive bid process for a consulting engagement for a public sector entity. Let's assume that you're in charge of gathering information to help your firm formulate a strategy for answering a request for proposal (RFP) document.

INFORMATION

In answering the RFP, you will want to demonstrate your respect for the complexity of the client's business niche. As a lead-abatement contractor, you might not know a lot about recent public sector lead abatement projects. Using the Internet, you're likely to locate a few pertinent news items that may prove beneficial. It may be that, in a neighboring state or region, a similar project took place recently and factual circumstances surrounding that project might make good conversation for answering the RFP. In short, you're demonstrating industry-specific best-practice awareness, and of course interspersing your own expertise and methodologies for dealing with similar situations into your coverage of the topic.

COMPETITIVE INTELLIGENCE

As ABC Company, you know that your main competition, XYZ Company, will also likely put together a bid. But what kind of qualifications might XYZ have for such a job? Again, we would turn to the Internet for any available information. We would want to know all we can about our most significant competition. People, past engagements, and any XYZ-specific news we can find will ultimately help us predict the strategy they are likely to employ. With this knowledge, we can say things like, "While certain others in our industry believe in this or that approach, our approach is superior because...."

BUSINESS DEVELOPMENT

Another aspect to consider is the "schmooze" factor. This is the part for which you research the target entity. Perform searches on the company/entity name, the key players, others at the company, etc. Try to find out all you can, especially about the interests of the people involved. If you're addressing the proposal to John Smith, find out all you can about John Smith. What's his history with the target company? Where does he live? Where did he go to school? Is he married? Does he have kids? Does he serve on any local boards? What are his political affiliations?

Approach the general company research in the same way: Who works there? What's their growth strategy?

> **Honing your Internet search skills better positions you for improved business development, competitive intelligence, and of course basic information awareness.**

Who are their clients? Who's on their board? What have they been in the news for lately?

In all areas, try to make connections to your business, and then leverage such connections within your proposal. Leave no stone unturned, and you'll have plenty of general guidance to inform your approach toward answering that RFP.

THE RESOURCES

As a starting point for any search, I'd recommend *Yahoo!, http://www.yahoo.com*. No, I'm not getting paid to make this recommendation. This is simply the best starting point, IMHO (which is Netspeak for "in my humble opinion"). To really dig in, though, I'd recommend the sites listed below. For all of these services, the *most important advice* for optimizing your search results is to locate and study the advanced search instructions. Nearly all sites include such instructions, and you'll be surprised at the options available for the more intrepid.

The Freebies

AltaVista, http://www.alta-vista.com/. An extremely versatile, extremely powerful resource. Any name, phrase, or string in your entire search will likely turn up something from this page. Try to start with short, broad-sounding strings, and then hone in on your prey. This is also a great place to type in your own name. Give it a try! (Tip: Place your name within quotes in the search form. If "your name" has too many results, try narrowing it down by adding your home town or some other distinguishing factor, such as your company name, into the search string. You might also try variations of your name; Bob for Robert, Bill for William, etc.)

American City Business Journals, http://www.amcity.com/. Search business articles from Albany, Atlanta, Austin, Baltimore, Bellevue/Redmond, Birmingham, Boston, Buffalo, Charlotte, Cincinnati, Columbus, Contra Costa, Dallas, Dayton, Denver, Greensboro/Winston-Salem, Honolulu, Houston, Jacksonville, Kansas City, Louisville, Memphis, Milwaukee, Minneapolis/St. Paul, Nashville, Orlando, Philadelphia, Phoenix, Pittsburgh, Portland, Raleigh/Durham, Sacramento, St. Louis, San Antonio, San
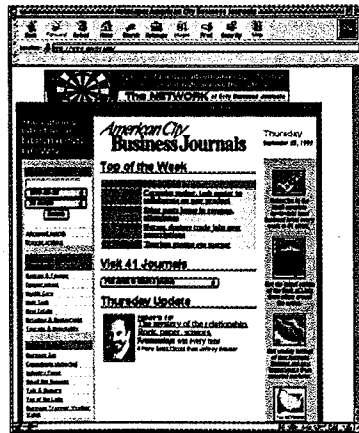
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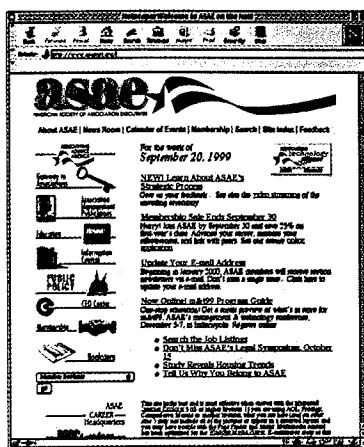
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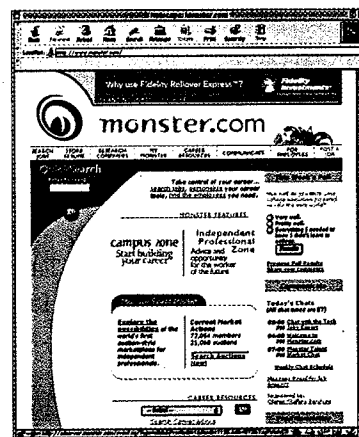
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Francisco, San Jose, Seattle, South Florida, Tampa Bay, Washington, and Wichita. This resource will come in particularly handy for those who don't have access to some of the pay services (listed below). The American City home page, noted above, allows global searches of past and current issues of all 40-plus papers. Searches for businesses and businesspeople often result in useful information.

ASAE's Gateway to Associations Online, http://www.asaenet.org/Gateway/OnlineAssocSlist.html. A great way to research any general industry or cause is to find the association that exists specifically for that reason. Interestingly enough, if you perform a generic search on the category keyword "Environment," A&WMA is the first association listed! (Of course, they're in alphabetical order, but it's always nice to be first.)

Deja.com, http://www.deja.com/. As a research tool, the service is useful for its convenient interface with 40,000 online discussions (through which users can search using a particularly powerful search engine). This is also a great place to pose questions to topic-specific groups. No matter how esoteric your question, odds are someone will answer, provided you've selected the appropriate forum for discussion.

Edgar, http://www.sec.gov/edgarhp.htm. This is the Securities and Exchange Commission's corporate information site formed to "increase the efficiency and fairness of the securities market...." It's an invaluable tool for researching public companies. In general, you'll want to type the company name into the search engine, and look for its 10-K filing (its annual report), which contains all sorts of useful company information (such as financial details, management team information, company history, product and service offerings, etc.). Of course, this is the official public-entity information. If you want the "word-on-the-street" type of information on public companies, you might want to check out some stock market discussion boards, like *Raging Bull, http://www.ragingbull.com/*. You never know what you'll find on a site like that (and you should use careful judgment when basing important decisions on such information).

Headhunter.net and *Monster.com, http://www.headhunter.net* and *http://www.monster.com/*, respectively. You can learn a lot

about a company through the employment ads it posts. As more and more companies utilize Web-based services for recruiting, it's only natural for them to populate these databases with information about themselves.

Newspaper Web Sites. In addition to the sites mentioned above, take a few minutes to research and bookmark as many local, regional, state, and national news sites as you can. Most of the national favorites, and an increasing number of local-oriented sites, archive information and allow full-text keyword searchability. If you're researching particularly small businesses, you may find local papers useful and informative. A good way to find links to local newspaper sites is by surfing community-oriented Web sites (which are also good bookmarks for your local research).

Pay Services

Many companies compile information from most of the sources listed above, and then mix in their own proprietary knowledge bases to come up with convenient, value-added information products. These are by no means cheap, but they can often offer finer details than many of the freebie services listed herein. If you really need the most in-depth information available, take a moment to explore the following:

- *Dow Jones Interactive, http://www.dj-interactive.com/.* A bit pricey, but excellent for industry information and searchable publication archives.
- *Lexis-Nexis Universe, http://www.lexis-nexis.com/.* An excellent resource for hard-to-find information on public and private companies. Seems broader in its knowledge base scope than comparable services.
- *OneSource, http://www.onesource.com/.* A great service that does a lot of what the previous two listings do, but also offers some outstanding features such as the capability to identify companies that match user-specified criteria (such
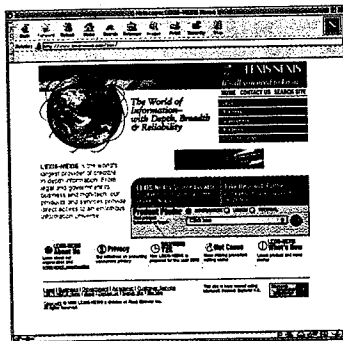

lexis-nexis.com

as size, Standard Industrial Classification code, region, etc.) and then export that information into a spreadsheet.

"CHANCE FAVORS THE PREPARED MIND"

That famous quotation from Louis Pasteur relates well to Internet research. Going back to our fictitious RFP scenario, even if your firm (ABC Company) was an ace contractor, had a handle on the competitive angle, and was well prepared for face-to-face meetings with the target client, this research should still be viewed as due diligence work. Sometimes, surprising facts emerge from Internet archives. For instance, I once researched a target client with whom our firm had historically encountered difficulty in penetrating. The contact for that target was the CEO of XYZ Company; our firm served 123 Company, a regional leader in the same industry.

"Hey, we've got it made," we thought, "because we already have some outstanding qualifications in serving this industry." So we went in there time after time, spouting off about our excellent services to 123. What we didn't know, however, is that XYZ's CEO used to *run* 123, and left under extremely bad circumstances. That CEO didn't want to hear word one about 123, and we were aggressively flaunting it. (The lesson here offers an intersting paraphrase of Pasteur's observation—that chance "doesn't disfavor" the "unprepared mind.")

In sum, your research arms you with information—often surprising amounts of it. However, even after extensive research, you might be faced with a rather piecemeal assemblage of facts and figures. So the better you are at inference, the better you'll be at interpreting what's before you. The good news is that the art of research is something at which great leaps can be made in relatively little time. The more you do, the better you'll be at it (and chance will favor your "prepared mind"). ◓

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