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Finding Private Company Information

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Private company information is the holy grail for even seasoned researchers – difficult to obtain, and highly prized. To go beyond the basics, here are some tips for conducting research, and some often surprising sources that you should try.

What Do Private Companies Look Like?

Private companies are hard to categorize. They may be extremely large, profitable corporations with operations all over the U.S. or they may be as small as a sole proprietorship. Large private companies, such as Adelphia, may turn up in mainstream news sources, while the skills and used to research small private companies and sole proprietorships are similar to, and overlap with, those used to research individuals. Keep in mind that some of the sources below may work better for large private companies, and some for smaller companies.

Sources

SEC and local regulatory agencies - FREE

Surprised? Don't be. The SEC may have information about your PC for the following reasons: 1) A company may have wanted to go public at some point in the past and filed pre-IPO paperwork with the SEC, and then changed their mind. That paperwork is still on file, and in the public record; 2) Small private businesses that operate almost entirely in a single state and want to raise money only in that state, may have to register with the SEC, either federally or locally. The documentation required is simpler and less detailed than public IPOs, but does provide good data. Start researching the local regulatory bodies in states where you know the company does business. See <http://www.sec.gov/info/smallbus/qasbsec.htm#eod6> for more details; 3) a public company that does substantial business with, or intends to purchase a private company may be required, or feel it necessary, to report information about the private company as it relates to the business of the larger company.

The SEC databases on Westlaw LexisNexis, LivEdgar - FEE

These sources allow you do a global search, across company filings, for the name of your PC or an individual's name. It is great if you have no idea where, or if, your company appears.

Internet News -FREE

If your company is small, or a sole proprietorship, Google and Yahoo! News will be better sources of information than the news databases than Westlaw and LexisNexis. Search for the names of anyone associated with the company, too. This could lead to information about affiliated companies, prior company names, name of people who were associated with this company who you might contact, as well as a wealth of other information.

ProQuest and EBSCO, Full Text, through the San Francisco Public Library - FREE with library card

I'm going to make my plug here for getting a library card in the name of your company, (although your own card will work, too) which you can use access ProQuest (newspapers) and EBSCO (magazines) in full text. ProQuest and EBSCO are among my favorite sources, and are favored by educators nationwide. Sources from ProQuest alone include *The New York Times*, *The Wall Street Journal*, *The Christian Science Monitor*, and *The Washington Post*, in some cases going back decades.

Industry Specific News Databases on Westlaw and LexisNexis – FEE

After you've searched ProQuest and EBSCO for free, use Westlaw and/or LexisNexis to check industry-specific publications for references to the PC or its principals.

Accurint, Choicepoint and Merlin – FEE

These very reasonably priced services contain data about companies and individuals, nationwide, taken from credit headers and other sources. As with Internet news research, be sure to check the names of individuals who are associated with your company. A full report will list companies and company assets (such as a car) "associated with" an individual.

Patents and IP Databases on LexisNexis, Westlaw, Dialog - FEE

An important part of a company's assets are its patents and intellectual property.

Lawsuit information on PACER, Courtlink and Courthouse News Service – FEE

PACER is a government database, and is very inexpensive. Lawsuits can uncover valuable information for the private company researcher. Don't forget to search individually for the names of principals, too.

Lawsuit information on Westlaw – FEE

The ADVERSE filings database is my current favorite for researching lawsuits. It searches in civil litigation, UCC filings and bankruptcy proceedings. Although easy to use, it is finicky. It's worth the extra money and time to search it under different variations of the company and person name.

Patents & IP Databases – FREE

The U.S. Patent Office and the European Patent Office allow for patent searching as well, although not with the ease of fee based services.

Dun & Bradstreet – FREE with a SFPL library card, FEE otherwise

D&B is the credit clearing house for businesses, public and private, domestic and international. Companies are assigned a DUNS number. In some industries, the prevailing trade association makes having a DUNS number required for businesses in their industry. Also, financial institutions use D&B credit reports to assess a company's loan worthiness, so

although submission may be voluntary, most companies do register with D&B. D&B uses information supplied by the company, as well as interviews and research, to create its reports. D&B now owns the popular Hoover's, and will give out brief Hoover's company snapshots, for free.

Skyfinder – FEE

Skyfinder is a competitor of D&B, and has similar features and services.

For More Information

"The Internet and Company Information" by Gloria Miccioli,
http://www.llrx.com/features/co_research.htm, last viewed 7/7/06.

"Private Company Research" by the Library of Congress,
<http://www.loc.gov/rr/business/company/private.html>, last viewed 7/5/07.

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