



What to do on the Internet before you sue

Finding information cheaply about potential clients, defendants and witnesses

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Over the years, changes in technology and the increasing number of resources available on the Internet have greatly expanded investigation options. In the "old days," only large law firms could afford expensive legal databases and access to confidential records. All that has changed. Because of advances in technology and the advent of the Internet, there are many sources of confidential information available online at little or no cost.

Introduction

The purpose of this article is to identify inexpensive Internet resources that will enable the small firm or solo practitioner to access the same confidential information previously available through costly contracts with private vendors.

Public records databases

- <http://www.searchsystems.net/>

The Search Systems database has been on the Net since 1997. Today, Search Systems claims to provide access to "39,898 Searchable Public Record Databases." This site provides information about businesses, professional licenses, corporate filings, deeds and mortgages, criminal and civil court filings, and arrest and conviction records. Noteworthy is that Search Systems is one of the few sites that provides a comprehensive list of public record databases for foreign countries.

Search Systems is well-organized, making it easy to find information. For example, searches can be done according to the type of public record or by location, such as by state or by country.

Search Systems used to allow free access to its databases. Because the site was expensive to maintain, it now charges users a nominal membership fee of \$48.50 per year or \$4.95 per month. In addition to allowing access to its databases, the company provides subscribers with discounts on other products, such as comprehensive criminal record or bankruptcy searches.

- <http://www.knowx.com/>

KnowX is a comprehensive, easy-to-navigate Web site that provides a wide range of information. Using KnowX is similar to using an Internet search engine. To access the database, the user enters the search criteria, clicks the search button, and the results are displayed. The KnowX site has a mixture of free and nominal fee databases, both labeled as to what is free or what costs money. If you access a fee database, a screen pops up, displays the cost, and gives you the chance to cancel your search.

The pricing page also clearly states how much the various searches cost, so you will not have any unexpected expenses. Frequent KnowX users may want to purchase a membership to get a discount on searches. The membership plans are organized by type of business or by time, such as a 24 hours, 30 days, or one year.

- <http://www.zabasearch.com/>

Use this site to search for people. The people search feature is free. If you know the name of the person you need information about, just enter it into the search box. A summary report listing the names, addresses, telephone numbers, and the dates that the information was first reported will appear.

Unlike many public record sites that charge for this information, it is free on Zabasearch. If you need a more detailed report, you can click the "more information" link and you will be directed to <http://www.intelius.com/> where you can purchase a comprehensive report or a background check. Zabasearch also enables you to search by telephone number, social security number, or by maiden name, but there is a small fee for these searches because this a "premium" feature.

- <http://www.pretrieve.com/>

Retrieve is a search engine that is specifically geared towards finding public records relevant to a person, business, or address. This site promises that you can "search thousands of official public record sites to find free court records, free criminal records, property records, and more."

You can use this site to locate people, find property, and look up criminal and civil case information. After entering the name of the person, you will be directed to a summary page listing what information has been located. However, in order to access the information, you will need to purchase a pass. Passes range in price



from \$7.95 for a one-time pass, \$19.95 for a 24-hour pass, or \$49.95 for a complete background report.

• <http://www.claimspages.com/data/index.asp>

This Web site is designed for professional claims adjusters. Therefore, the site contains information helpful to the insurance-adjusting industry. Attorneys who handle personal injury cases can benefit from the information contained on the site.

If you access the “databases” tab, you will see databases yielding information such as address verification, U.S. Consumer Product Safety Commission product recalls, California injury data information, and vehicle information reports through <http://www.carfax.com/>.

Click the “tools” and “automobile” tabs, and you will be directed to information useful in dealing with anything related to motor vehicle collisions, including distance calculators, skid/speed calculators and blood alcohol calculators.

The discussion groups are valuable as well, so be sure to check those out.

• <https://www.virtualgumshoe.com/resources/>

This Web site features “free resources for investigators.” This site has helpful links to public records databases,

including free criminal record searches through federal, state and county databases.

• <http://www.merlindata.com/industrylinks.html>

The Merlin Data Web site is a comprehensive source of free public records. Some of the more obscure databases that might be helpful to lawyers include records for medical professionals that defaulted on their health education assistance loans, an acronym finder and a social security death index.

Company information

• SEC Filings at <http://www.sec.gov/cgi-bin/srch-edgar>

One of the best ways to find information about public companies is to visit <http://www.sec.gov/cgi-bin/srch-edgar>. This is the Web site for EDGAR, the acronym for the SEC’s Electronic Data Gathering, Analysis, and Retrieval system. Excellent sources for detailed corporate information include SEC registration statements, Form 10-K reports, and Form 10-Q reports.

• Annual Reports at http://yahoo.ar.wilink.com/asp/YAH1_search_ENG.asp

Companies seeking investors created this site so annual reports could be downloaded for free. Search by company

name, type of industry or alphabetically. If a company is not listed, check back later because new companies are added all the time.

• California Secretary of State at <http://kepler.sos.ca.gov/list.html>

Go here to get registration and status information for California corporations, limited liability companies, and limited partnerships.

Conclusion

By using the online resources described in this article, small firms and sole practitioners can now successfully and cost-effectively compete with the “big guys.”

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