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Library Showcase: Cut to the Chase By Tamara Thompson



Even though savvy use of online personal information can vastly increase the chance of locating a witness or uncovering an unknown court case, databases can also waste a searcher's time and money. Here's a quick overview of available data services and tips on how to use them to your advantage.

Government Sites

Government agencies are increasingly placing public records indexes — along with scanned documents — online, in searchable databases. Usually free, these collections are at government operated and maintained websites. These sites allow access to current data from county recorders, professional licensing divisions and vital records offices, as well as civil and criminal filings at courts.

Some commercial sites, such as Courthousedirect.com, offer downloadable copies of the documents.

Offerings vary from state to state. For example, at the California Secretary of State Corporations site, the only search terms are words in the company name. This site is valuable for finding the registered agent and office address. However, no business filings are available. In contrast, the Idaho Department of Corporations site has a search field for registered agents and has downloadable current and historical filings, revealing more names of officers. To find a specific online government-maintained public records site try the free searchable database, searchsystems.net.

Government public records indexes are not always accurate, especially once data has been tweaked to remove particular portions of personal identifiers, such as birthdates, social security numbers or home addresses. (This practice is becoming more prevalent, due to alarm over identity theft.)

Commercial Databases

Commercial databases often complement the online information provided by public agencies. They are created from a combination of public records — such as court, voter registration, driver license and real estate data — and private repository data, such as magazine mailing lists, fast food delivery service files, cell phone and landline directories and credit bureau address listings.

The hefty fees of a commercial vendor do not guarantee complete protection from stale data, because the federal government has instituted tiers of access (stipulated in recent statutes), making current addresses drawn from credit bureau files mostly off-limits. Apply a wary eye to all search results, and keep these tips in mind.

- Data can be old, limited in scope and date range, vague, and inaccurate.
- All online personal information services are not created equal. One type may be more expensive than another for the same return; some services integrate data in more usable forms; some overload searchers with irrelevant, search-clogging sludge.
- Electronic data is a starting point, not conclusive.
- You must verify that the person you've located is your subject.
- All information must be confirmed by securing documents, conducting interviews, cross-checking or verifying addresses in person.

Comparing Data Services

Dayton's LexisNexis U.S. and Alpharetta, Ga.-based ChoicePoint Asset Co. have absorbed (and buy from) many local and specialized data providers. Almost all other personal information companies purchase data from these two and/or the TransUnion credit bureau. However, there are independent providers that are not only less expensive than Lexis, but also more accessible to an infrequent information searcher.

Other options include:

- Merlin Information Services (Merlin data.com) collects public records indexes from California state and county entities, and its data extends back into the 1980s. Merlindata employs text-indexed and wildcard technology, and for one dollar will provide customers a list of all the California indexes in which the keywords appear.
- ChoicePoint aggregates its data by cross searching, thus integrating search results from many databases. A name/address/social security number/date of birth is matched with portions of the selected identifiers appearing in its databases, then delivered as an integrated report. This type of approach can be useful to find a subject in previously unknown records, but the quantity of irrelevant material can sometimes overwhelm the searcher.
- The ChoicePoint subsidiary, AutotrackXP, offers a search by first name combined with date of birth or city. This is invaluable for finding

women about whom little else is known, as women's surnames often change following marriage and divorce.

- LexisNexis' Accurint is a far-reaching people locator, but not all of its searches are comprehensive. Another option is the PACER Service Center, maintained by the federal government. For 8 cents, PACER searches a personal or business name across all federal criminal, civil and bankruptcy dockets. Dockets can be downloaded for an additional 8 cents.
- PI.Intelius.com is recasting itself as a low cost data aggregator, marketing heavily to private investigators. Its background reports incorporate civil judgment filings, address history, property ownership, and civil and criminal index listings for \$3.75. That's a good price, but be aware of the possible limitations: these criminal records indicators are only for the states appearing in the address history, and the counties are not specified in the results.

Guidelines

Here are some search guidelines:

- Consider whether a fee service offers more current, comprehensive content than the corresponding government-operated site.
- Remember that a reliable provider identifies: the information source (i.e. Colorado DMV), the specific holdings (i.e. civil business filings only), and the inclusive dates and specific locales covered — and tells you the exact cost.
- Be sure that the information provider has the records and covers the region in which you are searching. What specific data will you get back from the search?
- Make use of the free aspect of internet-only database companies, but be leery of fee searches. You may find overpriced, paid searches that return inaccurate, disorganized and dated information.

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