

Free and Low-Cost Resources for Researching Companies

by Andrea L. Hamilton

Subscription databases are convenient tools for researching companies. They offer advanced search features, pre-packaged results, and quick access to company authority files. However, these perks come at a cost, and much of the same information can be obtained for free (or a small fee) from publicly accessible authoritative sources. Consider using the resources below when conducting company research, especially when looking for specific details about a business entity.

Corporate Websites

Sometimes overlooked, corporate websites typically offer a wealth of information, including:

- headquarters and branch locations;
- parent company, subsidiaries, and other strategic partners;
- history (including former company names) and mission statement;
- leadership and their contact information;
- products, patents, and trademarks;
- news and press releases; and
- analyst coverage.

To access company profile information, navigate to the company's retail website and look for links such as "Company site" or "About," often located at the bottom of the page. Most public companies also have an "Investors" section directing visitors to required U.S. Securities and Exchange Commission (SEC) filings and disclosures (see SEC section, below).

The Wayback Machine¹ is an excellent source for historic information no longer available on a company's current website. Search by corporate domain to find archived versions of the company's website; specific sections can sometimes be found by appending a

path to the original domain name search (www.dmns.org versus www.dmns.org/planetarium). Because archived pages are organized by date, comparing versions of the same page can uncover hard-to-find details, such as when an individual joined or left the company.

The corporate domain can also be used to ascertain or verify an employee's email address that is not posted on the corporate website. For example, a Google search of "@dgsllaw.com" (with quotation marks) produces hits from the Davis Graham & Stubbs website, as well as other instances where a company email address was used. From these hits, the researcher can likely surmise the email address format and refine the search for a specific individual—for example, "lastname@dgsllaw.com."

Colorado Secretary of State

The Business Database Search² on the Colorado Secretary of State website is a trustworthy tool for searching and viewing business filings. This free resource provides basic information about a business, such as type (e.g., limited liability company, nonprofit, general partnership) and "status regarding timely filing of documents."³

An initial search brings up a "Summary" page containing such details as the entity's formation date and jurisdiction, its principal office street address, and the "Registered Agent." The Registered Agent entry may contain information about the founder, owner, or corporate counsel for that business.

The "History and Documents" page for domestic companies often provides a link to the Articles of Incorporation, which may also include insight into associated individuals, including directors and members. A "Statement of Merger" could be helpful in determining the corporate parent or a former company name; a "Trade Name" filing should provide additional search terms for identifying



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litigation and news. If an entity is designated “Foreign,” the jurisdiction listing will provide guidance as to another state’s Secretary of State or business registry site.⁴

SEC

If a foreign or domestic company registers its securities,⁵ pursuant to the Securities Act of 1933, “the company must then file periodic reports with the SEC under the Securities Exchange Act of 1934.”⁶ These reports can be found within the EDGAR Company Filings⁷ database on the SEC website. Form 10-K in particular (a company’s annual report) contains a wealth of business information, including:

- a description of the business;
- executive officers, with brief bios and compensation;
- significant real property;
- patents, trademarks, and licenses; and
- consolidated financial data, including identification of the company’s auditor.

Form 10-K also contains information about pending and future legal proceedings. Look for Item 3, specific to significant current legal proceedings, and Item 1A (Risk Factors), which anticipates areas of future concern and potential litigation for the company. (See PACER section, below, for locating details about these cases.)

The exhibits to Form 10-K also are important. EX-2 is specific to “plan of acquisition, reorganization, arrangement, liquidation or succession”; EX-3 contains articles of incorporation and bylaws; EX-10 is used for material contracts; and EX-21 is a list of subsidiaries of the registrant.⁸

GuideStar

GuideStar⁹ is a database of nearly every IRS-registered non-profit organization. It includes revenue and expense data for the current fiscal year; up to three years of Forms 990; and biographical information about the chief executive officer, board chair, and board of directors. GuideStar is free, but registration is required.¹⁰

PACER

PACER¹¹ is provided by the federal judiciary and “allows users to obtain case and docket information online from federal appellate, district, and bankruptcy courts.”¹² Researchers may search the PACER Case Locator across all federal courts and case types or search individual court websites. Registration is required,¹³ and most research will incur a \$.10 per-page search charge, with a maximum fee of \$3 per case-related document.¹⁴

Searches may be conducted by party name or case number. A researcher who has located a party name while reviewing Item 3 of Form 10-K can use PACER to access additional information about the case. Once a case of interest has been located, the “Attorney” link provides a list of parties and their representation; this feature can help researchers avoid the cost of downloading the full docket and any related filings. In addition, the complaint may provide company details, such as real or intellectual property, strategic partners, and related individuals.

The PACER search engine employs exact searching and “starts with” functionality. For example, a search for “davita” will return results for DaVita Clinical Research, Davita HealthCare Partners, Inc., DaVita Inc., and so on. A search for “davita” will not return results for Da Vita. Similarly, a search for “davita inc” will return

results for DaVita Inc., but not for “Davita, Inc.” Thus, searches should be as inclusive as possible and limited to the first word or two of the company. All conceived variations of a company name should be searched, as should parent name, subsidiaries, former names, and trade names.

ICCES and CoCourts.com

ICCES¹⁵ is the Colorado Judicial Branch’s e-serve and e-file platform; CoCourts.com,¹⁶ owned by LexisNexis Risk Solutions, was developed in cooperation with the Colorado Judicial Branch. Free registration is required for each resource. ICCES provides access to Colorado civil, criminal (limited districts), domestic, water, probate, and appellate court registers of actions (dockets) and filings.¹⁷ In addition to what is available via ICCES, CoCourts.com has expanded criminal coverage and Denver County records; however, the full text of filings is not available.¹⁸ There is no charge in ICCES to search and view parties and their counsel; a \$10 fee is charged to view the register of actions and as many filings from the case as is needed for 14 days. CoCourts.com charges \$7 per search, which includes the viewing of any or all of those search results for up to 24 hours.¹⁹

Like PACER, both of these platforms use “starts with” search functionality. State court complaints may provide company details, such as real or intellectual property, strategic partners, and related individuals. Searches should include the parent name, subsidiaries, former names, and trade names.

USPTO and ICANN WHOIS

These resources not only provide intellectual property information, but also can be used to identify the corporate counsel for an organization. A patent can be searched by applicant or assignee name in the U.S. Patent and Trademark Office’s (USPTO) Patent Full-Text and Image Database (PatFT);²⁰ the resulting full text includes an “Attorney, Agent or Firm” field. Similarly, the USPTO’s Trademark Electronic Search System (TESS)²¹ can be searched by owner name and address; results may include the “Attorney of Record.” Searches can also be conducted by patent, serial, or registration number, perhaps identified via the company’s website, Form 10-K, or case complaint.

ICANN’s WHOIS Lookup²² can be used to find the registrant for a company’s website, as well as administrative and technical contacts. For larger organizations, the registrant is often a domain registrar company such as GoDaddy, but the search may also bring up an individual’s name, mailing address, phone and fax number, and email address.

EBSCO and Reference USA

Databases from these providers are available to many public library card holders.²³ EBSCO Industry’s Business Source Premier²⁴ provides access to market research and industry reports, as well as company profiles that may contain a “SWOT” analysis. A SWOT analysis details the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats of an organization, and may help assess the future health and direction of particular business. This type of analysis is typically available for larger companies.

Public records aren’t just available for individuals, but for business organizations as well. A listing from Reference USA’s²⁵ database of 24 million U.S. Businesses records may contain a manage-

ment directory, company news, business expenditures, sales and employee figures, franchise and brand information, Uniform Commercial Code (UCC) lien filings, judgments and bankruptcies, and a corporate tree. Listings also provide a means for purchasing an Experian Business Report.²⁶

News Collections

Lastly, news should not be forgotten as a means of investigating a company. Results may provide insight about corporate leadership; a new product line; financial issues; strategic partnerships; complaints, lawsuits, and product recalls; SEC filings; and an endless list of other possibilities.

Google News²⁷ is a good resource for free news. Other recommended news sources include NewsBank's America's News²⁸ and Gale's Business Collection²⁹—both available to many public library card holders. When using these sources, search variations of the company name, as well as the parent name, subsidiaries, former names, and trade names.

Conclusion

When company research is needed, the impulse may be to use a subscription database. However, as illustrated by the authoritative resources highlighted in this article, there are many free or low-cost alternatives on which the researcher may rely for insight into a business entity.

Notes

1. archive.org.
2. www.sos.state.co.us/biz/BusinessEntityCriteriaExt.do.
3. See www.sos.state.co.us/pubs/business/FAQs/general.html.

4. Coordinated Legal Tech, Secretaries of State: Find Corporation Information and Online Searchable Databases, www.coordinatedlegal.com/SecretaryOfState.html.

5. See 15 USC § 77b for the definition of "security."

6. SEC, Fast Answers, www.sec.gov/answers/noinfo.htm.

7. www.sec.gov/edgar/searchedgar/companysearch.html.

8. See 17 CFR § 229.601, (Item 601) Exhibits.

9. www.guidestar.org.

10. www.guidestar.org/Login.aspx.

11. www.pacer.gov/findcase.html.

12. See www.pacer.gov.

13. pacer.psc.uscourts.gov/psc/psc/psc/regWizard.jsf.

14. See www.pacer.gov/psc/faq.html.

15. www.courts.state.co.us/Administration/Unit.cfm?Unit=efile. Beginning in late 2016, ICCES (Integrated Colorado Courts E-filing System) will be known as Colorado Courts E-Filing.

16. www.cocourts.com/cocourts.

17. See www.courts.state.co.us/Administration/Unit.cfm?Unit=efile.

18. See cocourts.com/cocourts/aboutCocourts.xhtml.

19. See *id.*

20. patft.uspto.gov/netahtml/PTO/search-bool.html.

21. www.uspto.gov/trademarks-application-process/search-trademark-database.

22. whois.icann.org/en.

23. See Colorado Department of Education, Directory of Colorado Libraries, find.coloradolibraries.org.

24. www.ebscohost.com/academic/business-source-premier.

25. resource.referenceusa.com.

26. Experian Information Solutions, Inc., Smart Business Reports, www.smartbusinessreports.com/abfiles/ab2216.htm.

27. news.google.com.

28. www.newsbank.com/libraries/public/solutions/us-national/american-news.

29. www.cengage.com/search/showresults.do?N=197. ■