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Online research can help you find new clients

Researching a potential new client and his/her company before your first meeting greatly increases your chance to win their business. Doing a little pre-meeting homework allows you to develop a general understanding of your prospective client's business, industry and markets, thus engaging them from the start.

There are some great free and low-cost online sources available to help you prepare for your meeting.

- Begin with your client's company Web site, if it has one.

Vacuum the client's Web site for pertinent information. Look for CEO and management names and their backgrounds, products and product lines, pricing, markets and news releases. Check out the Corporate Information or About Us Web pages to learn more about the company's history and founders.

Visit every Web page. Though a Web page may not look pertinent, it could provide access to an unexpected useful link or tidbit of information. Leave no stone unturned.

- Utilize the reverse link feature available from some search engines.

This great tool allows you to uncover who links to your prospective client's Web site, thus potentially revealing company media coverage, alliances, partners, trade organization memberships and more.

Meeting with Boeing executives? In the Google browser, type `link:www.boeing.com` to locate thousands of hits to the Boeing URL from other Web sites. Do you prefer to Yahoo!? Type `link:http://www.boeing.com` in Yahoo!'s browser to retrieve additional links to the Boeing Web site. (Note that when using Yahoo! for this search strategy, the URL needs to be prefaced with .)

The reverse link feature is also great for competitive intelligence research, as it sometimes illuminates a company's relationships, vendors, suppliers and distributors.

- Search online news sources.

Regional and trade press are additional key



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sources for company information, most especially private company information. In general, private company data is more difficult to locate than public company data because private companies aren't required to disclose certain information, such as financials.

Visit www.BizJournals.com to access media coverage online from 42 local business newspapers around the country. There is no fee to become a registered user, and archives date back to 1996.

Another source for company news is www.FindArticles.com, which has more than 8 million articles in its database from more than 900 magazines and journals, according to their Web site. There's no cost to purchase some articles, and a nominal fee to purchase others. Archives date back to 1984, the Web site says. One caveat, however, is that articles take one to two months to appear in the database after they're published in a magazine.

- Comb company directories.

Company directory databases bring together company information from a variety of data providers and make it searchable from one source. Directories are like a one-stop shop for company data. Some company directories focus on a particular industry, and others require a subscription to access more detailed company profiles. The level and depth of specific company information can vary, depending on what's available for that particular organization.

Hoover's Online (www.Hoovers.com) is one company directory. The Hoover's database provides information on approximately 42,000 companies, divided almost evenly between private and public companies. Its database includes company name, address, Web site URL, history, products or services, financials (when available), competitors and news.

Hoover's also includes industry profiles and information on key people in an organization.

Go to www.hoovers.com/free for access to Hoover's free site. The free site offers basic information, but there are subscription options available that allow access to more detailed information. If you conduct a lot of company research, it's a great investment.

Thomas Register (www.ThomasRegister.com) is an industrial buying guide, and there's no cost to view the company profiles online. Profiles include company name, address, contact information, company information, employees, activity (manufacturer, for example), year founded and export markets.

- Invest in an industry profile.

Round out your research by learning about your client's industry. Does your client's company make widgets for the filter industry? Get smart about the filtration industry. Industry and trade associations and organizations can offer a fountain of information about a particular industry, and sometimes offer white papers or profiles at minimum or no cost.

There are a number of boutique-type industry profile sources as well. FirstResearch (www.FirstResearch.com) offers more than 170 industry profiles for \$99 each. They cover health care, manufacturing, technology, communications and more.

As with any and all Internet and Web research, it's best to verify your information with a second (and even a third) source. Watch for inconsistencies. Be on the alert for biases.

Preparing for your potential new client takes effort. But understanding your client's business before you first shake hands leaves more time to listen to your client during your time together. And you'll dazzle your prospect by asking relevant, focused questions about their business goals.

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