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Use online research to gain a competitive advantage

"Information is power," as the old adage goes. And in our quest to locate competitor information, it's often necessary to utilize a wide range of online tools. Consider adding the following resources to your arsenal of information-gathering techniques.

• Familiarize yourself with the Invisible Web.

Also known as the Deep Web or Hidden Web, the Invisible Web allows users access to Web pages not usually visible to search engines because of technical reasons, or because of restrictions placed by a domain's owner.

Sites that require a subscription or registration to access, and government sites and databases, for example, are part of the Invisible Web. Invisible Web sources typically generate higher-quality search results than what is retrieved via search engines and can be a terrific tool for competitive intelligence research.

Two quality directories for finding Invisible Web databases and resources include www. Invisible-Web.net and the Librarians' Index to the Internet, www.lii.org. One popular Invisible Web search engine is IncyWincy at www. IncyWincy.com. These sites will provide you with a jump start on any new subject you might be researching.

• Search your competitor's Web site with an open mind.

Start with the site map. Pay special attention to links to product and service descriptions, job announcements, investor relations, annual reports and press releases. Consider subscribing to your competitor's news releases when this option is available.

The About Us section can unveil information about your competitor's vision, as well as executive and director biographies, and corporate giving programs. Your goal here is to look for any indications of changes in your competitor's business direction and how they're positioning themselves on the Web.

For certain competitive intelligence situations, it's sometimes important to learn how your competitor's Web site has evolved. The Internet Archive WayBack Machine, www. Archive.org, is a great tool for this. Simply

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type your competitor's URL into the search queue, then click on the Take Me Back button to begin searching an archived version of your competitor's Web site. The WayBack Machine also indicates when your competitor's Web site has been updated through the years.

• Make use of advanced search techniques in Google.

Google, and other search engines, offer advanced search techniques that are helpful for all kinds of business intelligence. You'll find two features particularly useful for competitor research: file format searching and reverse linking.

The file format feature allows you to search

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specifically for files in PowerPoint, PDF, Excel and other formats, thus enabling you to locate competitor presentations, white papers, reports and other quality documents.

Looking for PowerPoint presentations either created by Hewlett-Packard or that include Hewlett-Packard's name? Type "Hewlett Packard" filetype:ppt into Google's browser.

Interested in reports or white papers where Dell Inc. is mentioned? Type Dell filetype:pdf in the browser.

Google's reverse-linking feature enables you to uncover who links to your competitor's Web site, thus potentially revealing your competitor's alliances, partners, relationships, vendors, suppliers and distributors. In the Google browser, type link:www.Your-Competitor's-Name.com to disclose businesses and organizations that link to your competitor's Web site.

• Research in regional newspapers and business journals.

Investigate where your competitor's com-

pany is based and in what cities it conducts major operations, then search in the local publications for press coverage. Quite often, regional newspapers and journals conduct in-depth interviews with CEOs and other company executives, and provide up-to-date company news coverage. Local press can offer windows of opportunity to peer into your competitor's business.

Virtually all newspapers are now online and there are several sources that can connect you to them. The US Newspaper List, www. usnpl.com, and NewsLink, NewsLink.org, are two such sources. Each provides an avenue to thousands of newspapers across the country and is searchable by state.

Gain access to 42 local business newspapers from around the country via BizJournals.com, www.BizJournals.com. Become a registered user for free at the site.

Search in U.S. Securities and Exchange Commission filings.

A whole host of public company competitor information can be found using EDGAR, the Electronic Data Gathering, Analysis and Retrieval system compiled by the SEC, www. sec.gov/edgar.shtml.

Public companies are required to file many reports using EDGAR that disclose financial, competitor, executive, legal and other information. There's no charge to search in EDGAR. Note that the Investor Relations link on your competitor's Web site usually provides a passageway to its SEC filings as well.

Researching and monitoring competitors is helpful for decision-making. It allows you to take a proactive stance in relation to your competitors, rather than reacting to their moves, thus placing you at a competitive advantage. You'll better understand what business challenges lie ahead and unveil unexpected opportunities for your business.

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