Kick the Google Habit

Only after I had spent way too much time constructing complicated search strings for multiple search engines and way too much money in Factiva looking for a report, only then did I finally break down and call the association that might know my answer. Unfortunately, the association's spokesperson told me they don't do the type of research I needed and the director who might know the answer was at home with a back. How weary for him. Maybe he would enjoy an interesting call. So I called him.

"Honey, can you go over to my desk and hand me that stack of papers?" said the executive director of a major association. I imagined him pointing to a desk from his La-Z-Boy, where he has his feet elevated. Over the phone, I hear his wife rustling through some papers. Bingo! He remembered reading something about a study that might have exactly the information I needed. Yes!

He rustled some papers on the other end of the phone, then told me the name of the graduate center in New York that conducted the study. Within seconds I had the full study I needed, launched based on the keywords he gave me under his breath. By the time he got around to reading the data to me, I had already printed off the PDF file and was patiently — and politely — waiting for him to finish reading.

There is something to say about the effectiveness of combining online research with talking to people in real life. People who are way into what they do like to talk about it, especially academics and experts. There is no substitute for the resources in the recesses of an expert's brain. Think of a person's memory as the ultimate database and a conversation as the search engine. You have a better chance at finding relevant results for your queries if you combine input from someone who knows something about your subject with the depository of material available online.

All too often our first instinct as searchers is to throw a few keywords into a search engine and let the machine do the thinking. I'm guilty of googling too. I googled it. Google the verb. (Google; v. 1. to use google. 2. a method of searching for information using an Internet search engine.) Using search engines to start and finish research has become a reflex and, sometimes, more like a bad habit. That's just fine for the layperson, but it's frightening how many professionals rely on search engines to start and finish their research efforts and then are surprised when they can't find the information. Even worse, all too many just settle for whatever information the engine retrieves. Jonathan Gordon-Till, author of "Search Engines Make Us Dumb," recently published on http://vnunet.com, expands on this idea. He claims our tireless pursuit of "better" search engines overlooks the fact that we are abrogating our obligation to think, in the misplaced belief that what a search engine actually does is search.

I offer a research solution based on moderation: a balanced research diet that includes a combination of search engines and old school research, or what Barbara Quint coins as "old online" — calling people on the telephone. Find people online, then contact them. Or, contact them on the phone and search their memories for answers, or leads to answers (even URLs). Incorporate human intelligence throughout the research process.

People-finding Web sites available on the Internet are wonderful. You can find academics and experts really fast anywhere, at the office or at home. Academics have odd hours and are not always in their office, especially in the summer months. Industry experts who work with professional associations may not always be in the office either; sometimes their offices are no more than a PO. box.

Researchers should use their resources not only for finding contacts for patrons, but as part of the process of gathering information. Of course Freebies on the Web such as Switchboard.com or Anywho.com can find phone numbers. However, more sophisticated online people-finding tools are popping up all over the Internet at incredibly low costs. You might be surprised if you looked into how much these tools don't cost anymore.

What if you don't have access to public record aggregators such as Accurint and Autotrack, services that cross-reference enormous amounts of information, such as property and corporate records, and search current and old addresses based on as little information as a person's name or address? Then try a pay-as-you-go search in public record/people finders such as KnowX and whowhere.com.

There are a million ways to find experts: university Web sites, the Encyclopedia of Associations, the American Society of Association Executives' site [http://info.asaenet.org/gateway/OnlineAssocSlist.html]. The list goes on.
Pick Up the Phone. Whoever Talks the Longest, WINS!

I suggest contacting people in the know and using the conversation as a part of the research process. Take Dissertation Abstracts Online for an example. Toss a few keywords into the search engine [http://wwwlib.umi.com/dissertations/] and look through the free 30 PDF pages of the dissertation. Note the name of the author and university. If the free pages of the dissertation don’t answer your questions, call the university. The university will indicate the author’s last residence and help narrow down the search to find them at home. Tell the author you are struggling with some research and in desperate need of their expert advice. Next thing you know, they will be sending your e-mails with spreadsheets attached to them or faxing you pages of original research. Keep them talking. Whoever talks the longest, wins! What’s the worst thing that can happen? They hang up??

The same advice goes for trying to get information from companies or associations.

Research questions coming from the public typically go through a public relations person. PR will either give you their version of the information you seek or can put you in contact with an in-house expert. It might be worth your time to identify the individual, possibly an analyst or industry expert, in the company who has the information and call them directly. Try searching <site:companyx.com and subject> to locate potential leads. Try a literature search on the company and your subject and find people already quoted in the literature. If they talked once, it’s a reasonable assumption that they might be willing to talk again.

If all you can find is the main number of the company or find yourself stuck in a voice-mail tree, try looking at a company press release somewhere around the “About” section of the company Web site for a press release archive. Most of the time you can find a phone number somewhere on the document, or even cell phone numbers, of a live person who can point you in the right direction. Check out the “Investor Relations” section of the Web site if there is one. Once you have a relevant press release, you may also find the name of an executive the company considers quotable. With the name in hand, you might get past any barriers at the voice-mail or live operator level.

Granted, in the case with which I started this article, I was lucky enough to catch an expert on the phone at home. In hindsight, I question why I didn’t just call the association in the first place. When did the search engine become the first step in looking up information? Five years ago, before Google, what processes did information professionals undertake to get their research started? Over 200 million searches are processed by Google each day. “Is Google God?” a recent New York Times headline questions, with the article quoting an executive of a Wi-Fi provider as saying, “If I can operate Google, I can find anything,” and goes on to compare Google to being a bit like God. I’m sorry, but this sounds a bit like mass hysteria.

The Google reflex is a bad habit for information professionals to have. If you ever tried to quit a bad habit, like smoking, you’ll recognize the urge to Google reflexively. Try to hold out, and, in the meantime, think about the questions you are trying to answer and construct your own check list of logical places to find the information. Use human intelligence first. Call them up. Write them an e-mail. Then find out what the Web has to offer. The memory of an expert’s mind makes for a great subject search engine.