Reference Gymnastics
A Sampler of Creative Search Methods for Librarians on a Tight Deadline

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ews librarians are the air traffic controllers of the library field. We work with multiple blood-pressure-raising deadlines. Accuracy is essential. The information we provide is critical and, in some cases, the final call. With 5 minutes to answer several reference questions, the phone ringing with more, the paper going to press in 15 minutes, I like to think the reference interview with a client is similar to an air traffic controller assuring pilots they have a place to land.

Knowledge of a wide variety of resources is important, but even more important is how you use them. Creative researching can save you time and money. If the front door is locked, climb though the window. Here I'd like to show some unconventional uses of some Web sites we all access.

Google Cache

Google cache is a powerful resource that often gets overlooked. It's a researcher's loophole dream come true. Google takes a snapshot of each page examined as it crawls the Web and caches these as a backup. In essence, it can keep alive pages that the Web administrators have decided to take down. If Google cannot find the original page, it will provide a "cached" copy of the Web page as viewed on the day it was indexed. This means access, although limited access, to archives of newspapers, older financial documents at corporations, and other stuff Web site owners don't always want you to see anymore.

Many newspapers have only the most recent weeks' worth of the paper on their Web sites, then you are pointed to the fee-based archives. Search in Google on a topic — site: newspaperx.com + subject y — then scroll through the results, and click on the indexed link. It might say, "That page doesn't exist on our site. Go pay for it." However, you may get lucky and find a cached version of the page with the text you need.

The same thing goes for financial documents at companies. If you can't find specific numbers on the corporate Web site, don't stop until you have searched site: companyx.com + subject y and clicked on the cached documents.

Google lives in the gray area of copyright infringement, but the Internet is the modern-day Wild West and, until someone makes a fuss, it's a free-for-all. Deep in the "how-to" section lie instructions for Web site owners on how to keep Google from archiving content. Google suggests using a metatag on the pages Webmasters don't want archived by any robot. Google also has a metatag specifically for Google crawlers.

eBay, the Gold Mine

According to eBay spokesman Kevin Pursglove, more than 50 percent of the 12 million items listed on eBay on any given day have photographs. Here is a free, searchable database of 6 million images. If the U.S. Patent and Trademark Office search doesn't work when you want logo images, try looking at eBay. Good for at-wit's-end verification of the most trivial things, it carries photos of old ads, comic books, out-of-print vinyl records, portable toilets, etc.

In fact, a client once needed to contact relatives of an old R&B singer and none of the printed biographies listed any. So I pulled one of the rock's album covers up on eBay and read the dedications, which mentioned a brother and sister. Once we had their names, it was easy to locate their phone numbers. It could have been done by using other research methods such as making phone calls, but on a 5-minute deadline, eBay was a great last-ditch effort. Google "images" are good for the same type of searching.

You can also use eBay as a quasi-magazine index. Many major publications are not indexed, especially the older editions. The New Yorker and Rolling Stone are infamous for this. If you have a client who wants an article from a magazine and you have exhausted your resources, try finding it in eBay. We had a client who wanted the Rolling Stone issue with R.E.M. on the cover. A search on "REM and Rolling Stone" did the trick. We didn't buy the issue (I guess we could have), but at least we found the date of publication and took it from there.

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Amazon.com has overtaken Books in Print as a reference source for bibliographic information. Not only can you retrieve author, publisher, and book title information, some books have upwards of 50 pages scanned in. It's amazing the kind of information you can get out of the dust jacket, back covers, and pages scanned-in pages. Considered proprietary information, amazon does not disclose specific catalog size or details regarding site features. However, according to Amazon spokesperson Kristin Schaefer, Amazon.com is home to literally hundreds of thousands of "inside pages." Not a bad place to find free brief plot synopses, book reviews, and author biographies.

Hog Heaven

I guess there are a million ways to use Web sites in ways they weren't intended. It's very rewarding to find information that couldn't be found otherwise. Of course, there are many places to find similar information, but when nothing else works, or if you have only a few minutes to answer a reference question, these mega Web sites are easily accessible and stacked with tons of information, not just for-sale items.