

Get the Best from the Internet for Your Day-to-Day Business

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It's Not Just for the Gen X and Yer's

As a baby-boomer, I am constantly amazed by the magic of the Internet. It seems incredible to me that I can shop for a new car, plan trips, make travel reservations, and read my daily *Wall Street Journal* and *New York Times*, and order dinner for my family, all without leaving the comfort of my swivel chair. What's more, as real estate professionals, nearly limitless capabilities are available to us on a daily basis.

I have developed a brief sample of the best tools and Web sites that I and many colleagues and fellow SIORs use in our daily businesses. I did not find all of these sites on my own; I have included several sites that colleagues have shared with me. These Web sites fall into three main categories: people, properties, and news/general research. These are the areas where I find myself spending most of my time when I need to turn to the Internet for help.

Find People

Jigsaw - Our business is founded upon creating, building, and sustaining personal relationships. At the outset of those relationships, we need to identify the people we want to reach. A great resource for that purpose is www.jigsaw.com, an online business directory where you can find and trade business contact information (includes phone numbers and e-mail addresses) for private as well as public companies. Using this resource, you can find business executives, contacts, and companies by geographical area in any industry and business in Jigsaw's business directory.

The most powerful and unique thing about Jigsaw's business contacts is that they are member generated: Members add business contacts to get business contacts they want. The resulting database contains the newest, most accurate business sales leads and it is constantly cleaned to be more efficient and timely.

Jigsaw's Web site charges a usage fee at several levels: \$25/month for 25 new contacts/month; \$49/month for 60 new contacts/month; and \$250/year for a total of 350 new contacts/year. Custom fee arrangements are available.

Google - For me, the most extensive (no charge) resource for finding people is www.google.com. I have a Google toolbar imbedded into my Internet browser since I use it upwards of 30 times a day. The power of Google is hard to match, whether you are searching for a person, a place, lyrics to a song, or a good recipe for paella.

One Source - Finally, a higher-end tool for locating people as well as the companies they work for is www.onesource.com. This is also a paid subscription service. Annual rates are based on the number of subscribers: \$5,500 per user for one person, \$2,758.33 per user for two people, or a total of \$8,275 for three users from the same company. Once you log in, you can search corporate families, industries, key executives, and financial information for more than 17 million global companies and 21 million executive profiles. The content is drawn from 30 information providers, integrating some 2,500 separate information sources, to include executive listings and profiles, corporate profiles and financials, industry analyst reports, news wires, and more.

Find Properties

State and local governments have truly jumped on the Internet bandwagon in recent years. The availability and sophistication of online services for uncovering in-depth information on improved and unimproved real estate is staggering. No longer must we order and maintain those ungainly, hefty tract books and take up storage space to house them. If your printer can spit out 11" x 17" sheets, you are good to go!

In the Chicago area, as well as in most major metropolitan areas, county and municipal governments make their real estate tax and assessment records available online. Going further, there are now high-level GIS (geographic information systems) and mapping Web sites, providing in-depth aerial photos, zoning data, topographical information, and a plethora of other facts and figures.

One SIOR colleague notes that in Charlotte, North Carolina, he uses a local county GIS Web site in conjunction with surrounding counties' GIS Web sites on a daily basis to determine ownership, zoning, tax value, topography, general site configuration, the presence and location of utilities, how buildings are situated on land sites, and the identities of adjacent property owners.

Netronline - What if you're not in Chicago or Charlotte, and you don't know what's available in your area? My office's vice president of market research gave me the answer: www.netronline.com. This free Web site can connect you with the sites in all 50 states for real estate information and public records research. For properties, you can find property reports, parcel maps, document images, and more from hundreds of counties nationwide. The Public Records Online Directory provides a portal to official state Web sites and to those tax assessors' and recorders' offices that have developed Web sites for the retrieval of available public records over the Internet. I used this resource recently to conduct a successful search of existing mortgages on one of my client's properties to determine the level of debt on the property.

Aerial Property Images - For aerial photography and locating properties nation- and worldwide, the leaders appear to be <http://earth.google.com> and Microsoft's www.local.live.com. Both tools are downloadable for free (make sure you have plenty of memory because they can bring slower, older PCs to a grinding halt). I find the Microsoft tool to be a little easier to navigate and to be loaded with more current photography. What's more, you can manipulate aerial images in 3D. But beware: The 3D viewing software takes awhile to download, and the viewing controls are a bit awkward.

News and General Research

Wall Street Journal Online - We all have our favorites for reading up on daily news and events and for finding (or in many cases, receiving) breaking stories of interest. I find the *Wall Street Journal Online* (www.wsjonline.com) site to be particularly good and comprehensive in many ways. Like many online news services, you can create a personal profile that details those areas, companies, or industries of greatest interest and receive daily or weekly alerts and news stories concerning them. For financial information and research, it is terrific as well. Also, its national and international news and editorial content (opinionjournal.com) are all quite good.

Reference USA - One of our facilities management professionals finds www.referenceusa.com, (an Info USA company research portal) to be particularly useful. One of many available comprehensive database providers, this Web site allows you to look up tenants in buildings, do reverse address searches, and gather substantial current business information, including corporate executives' names, genders, and biographical information; liens and filings; company sizes; and SIC codes. This service is free with a library membership. However, not all libraries subscribe to it. Check with your local library for details.

Constant Contact - For mass marketing purposes, I now go to www.constantcontact.com. This broadcast e-mail Web site provides you with all the tools you need to create, send, and track broadcast e-mails and campaigns as often as you want. Given the cost and uneven dependability of "snail mail," I find the charge of \$35/month plus tax to be quite reasonable (there are several different plans). At times, I will create and send up to four broadcast e-mails per month to my entire database of 4,000 contacts. Then I track who has clicking through to my e-mails, what links they clicked on, how many e-mails are getting "bounced" due to bad e-mail addresses, and more. There are other similar tools available for this purpose also (for example, www.verticalresponse.com).

These are but a few of the Internet resources that can make a crucial difference in our day-to-day businesses. If you have a particular favorite or two that I did not include, please e-mail them to me (dliebman@colliersbk.com), as I hope to publish additional resources in updates of this article in future issues. In the meantime, happy surfing!

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