

DIRECTORS' BRIEFING



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Finding information on the Internet

● The Internet is a vast store of information and data, some of which could be highly valuable to you. But finding the specific information you need can be difficult and time-consuming.

This briefing will help you to overcome the obstacles, so your business can make good use of the Internet as an information tool. It is aimed at people who are already connected to the Internet.

The briefing explains:

- ◆ The range of information that is available.
- ◆ How to find what you are looking for.
- ◆ Common problems and how to avoid them.

1 What can you find?

The Internet contains information on almost every subject you can imagine. There are three basic types of information source.

A The main core of the Internet is the **World Wide Web**.

- ◆ Information is available on companies, markets, government legislation, weather reports, airline tickets, sports results and much more (see **3** and **4**).

See **Useful Internet sites**, IT 16.

- ◆ Some information pages are linked to computers that automatically update the contents every few minutes. For example, share price services.
- ◆ Some web pages are static, such as those for annual reports or dictionaries.
- ◆ Other sites can do things for you, such as translating text from foreign languages or updating you on the progress of an airliner

on a long flight.

- ◆ Many larger websites include access to a database of related information (see **C**).

Some of the information is put there by enthusiasts. The rest comes from companies, governments, public bodies and universities.

Most of this information is free, but you are increasingly likely to have to pay to access commercially valuable material. Information on the web is covered by copyright law.

B There are more than 35,000 **newsgroups**, which are often the most active part of the Internet.

- ◆ Newsgroups provide a good way of 'listening in' to discussions on a subject, an industry or a product. You can also participate in these discussions yourself.

FURTHER HELP

There are other Directors' Briefing titles that can help you. These briefings are referred to in the text by name and by the code given to each briefing. For example, the IT briefings have the codes IT 1, IT 2, etc.

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DIRECTORS' BRIEFING

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now available.

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ask the distributor of this briefing about
the services available to you.

- ◆ Newsgroups also provide a method of getting direct user or customer feedback.

Avoid the temptation to use newsgroups to advertise your business. This is frowned upon and can backfire badly.

C Commercial **databases** and **archives** are provided by many large organisations.

Access to most of these sites is free. But you may be asked to register by entering your name and other details, including information about your business.

- ◆ Newspapers and business magazines often provide searchable online archives, going back several years.
- ◆ Financial companies publish current and historical share price information and company results.
- ◆ Some search engine sites, such as Northern Light (www.northernlight.com), offer searchable databases and archives spanning thousands of different sources and publications.

You can often search a database and read a summary or the introduction to an article free of charge.

If you then download the whole item, you may have to pay a fee by credit card.

Prices are usually no more than 70p to £2.80, and are mostly quoted in US dollars.

Information on a plate

To receive regular bulletins of information, you can subscribe to either 'push' channels or to broadcast mailing lists.

You can often customise the service you get to provide only the information that you want.

- ◆ *Some companies use the Internet to inform their customers of their new products.*
Visit suppliers' websites to see if you can subscribe to regular information bulletins about their products.
- ◆ *Share price information for your portfolio can be delivered each morning via email.*
- ◆ *Keep up to date with business or industry news by downloading a tickertape bar that displays current news on your desktop from sources such as BBC News (<http://news.bbc.co.uk>).*
Ananova (www.ananova.com) allows you to create a personalised news page.
You can get email updates on a choice of 3,500 topics.

2 The machinery of searching

Search engines are directories that try to index everything on the web. Type in a keyword or phrase and they list your 'hits', with the closest apparent matches at the top of the list.

A There are hundreds of **search engines**, with around 50 that are particularly relevant to UK users. They all have their own strengths and weaknesses. Many try to provide extra information to appeal to a particular type of visitor.

- ◆ Yahoo! (<http://uk.yahoo.com>) is a good starting point when searching the web. It provides an accurate, but relatively small, directory of sites, organised by category but also searchable by keyword.
- ◆ AltaVista (<http://uk.altavista.com>), Lycos (www.lycos.co.uk) and the excellent Google (www.google.co.uk) also index the contents of individual web pages. Google and the quick All the Web (www.alltheweb.com) are generally recognised as the biggest information sources on the web.
- ◆ Ditto (www.ditto.com) is a search engine dedicated purely to pictures.
- ◆ Search engines providing UK-specific searching include Mirago (www.mirago.co.uk), SearchUK (www.searchuk.com) and UK Plus (www.ukplus.co.uk).
- ◆ Yell, from Yellow Pages (www.yell.com), and Scoot (www.scoot.co.uk) are probably the best places to search for products, services and companies.

B There are a growing number of **search sites** that will simultaneously submit your enquiry to a range of major search engines. They also collate and attempt to rank the information received.

- ◆ The best of these so-called 'meta-search engines' are Ask Jeeves (www.ask.co.uk), Ixquick (www.ixquick.com) and Metacrawler (www.metacrawler.com).

C Another route to automatic searching of search engines and other sources is to use a type of software known as a **search agent**.

- ◆ The best-known search agent, popular with academic and business researchers, is Copernic (www.copernic.com). A basic version of this flexible, powerful program, giving access to around 80 information resources can be downloaded free for use with Microsoft Windows.

D There are also search engines that specialise in covering the **newsgroups**, allowing you

"You are often asked to provide details about yourself before you access specific pieces of information. You should not object to this — information is the currency of the Internet! And the company could not justify supplying that information, if it did not receive anything in return."

Chris Bellamy,
FirstFound

to find relevant discussion forums quickly.

- ◆ Google allows you to search 35,000 newsgroups. Visit www.google.co.uk and click on 'Groups'.
- ◆ A complete list of UK newsgroups can be found at www.usenet.org.uk.

E If you need to know **who owns** a site, you can easily do an instant search, free.

- ◆ For most .uk sites, search at Nominet (www.nominet.org.uk).
- ◆ To find out about a .com site, first identify the registration company by searching at www.internic.net/whois.html. Then go to the registration company's website and search for the site owner there.
- ◆ NetNames (www.netnames.com) searches registration sites worldwide with one query.

Try out a range of different search engines to find one you particularly like.

Lists of all the major search engines, including descriptions of each one, can be found at www.firstfound.co.uk/searchengines.htm, and www.searchenginewatch.com/links.

3 Better searching

Using the correct search techniques can improve your chances of finding useful information.

A Enter as many **keywords** as possible to refine the search.

Government information sites

A **Directgov** (www.direct.gov.uk) is the main government information resource.

- ◆ You can search hundreds of local and central government websites simultaneously and access a wide range of news and services.

B The DTI's **Small Business Service** site (www.businesslink.gov.uk) provides information on topics such as finance, health and safety, marketing, finding premises, tax, grants and e-commerce.

- ◆ It also includes extensive links to other relevant sites.
- ◆ Sectoral information is provided on a wide range of industries and services.
- ◆ Interactive tools are available on the site to help you in areas such as finding the right finance for your business and working out your tax obligations.

- ◆ For example, a search on 'printers' will return over a million matching pages on some search engines.
- ◆ Refine this by entering 'bubblejet printers'. The first hits reported will be those including both 'printer' and 'bubblejet'.
- ◆ On many search engines, putting double speech marks around "bubblejet printer" forces a search for the exact phrase, with the two words together in this order.

B Some search engines allow you to use **special commands** for greater precision.

- ◆ For example, AltaVista and some others allow you to put a '+' in front of a word to stipulate that it must be in the matched page and a '-' in front of a word to indicate that it must not be included. A similar effect can often be produced by using terms such as AND, OR and NOT.
- ◆ Some search engines let you use 'wild card' symbols in your query. You may be able to use '%' to stand for a single letter or the asterisk for one or more characters.
- ◆ AltaVista and other search engines also let you search specifically for illustrations. If you want to find only web pages with pictures of Pete Sampras, you simply search for 'image:sampras'.

Different search engines use different sets of commands. Look for online guidance to get the best out of each search engine.

C Many directories group pages by **category**.

Using this feature, you can quickly narrow down the search area to a single category and search within that.

- ◆ For example, select the 'computers' category, then 'printers'. If you then search for 'bubblejet printers', the answers will come back very rapidly.

D For a **crash course** in effective searching, spend a few minutes at The Spider's Apprentice (www.monash.com/spidap.html).

- ◆ This site gives clear advice on which search engines to use for what. It also ranks performance, and updates you on latest search engine developments.

4 Finding a website

Finding a company's website address (otherwise known as its URL) can be a frustrating business.

Sites come and go, change their names or change their locations. Individual pages within them change even more confusingly. Knowing how to improvise can save you a lot of time.

◆ Most of the web addresses in this briefing are given in the form www.sitename.co.uk. With most browsers, the prefix <http://> will be inserted automatically. Please note that a few sites listed here have non-standard address forms. These have been written out in full, as in <http://uk.yahoo.com>.

A If you are looking for a business website and you have no idea where to find it, there are several **approaches** you can try.

- ◆ Insert the company's name, or its brand name, or its principal product name, between <http://www.> and [.com](http://www.com) or [.co.uk](http://www.co.uk).

For example, www.sainsburys.co.uk or www.budweiser.com.

One or other of these combinations may well work. After all, most firms try to register a web address that customers would expect.

- ◆ Run a search on Google, or on your favourite search engine, using the main word or words from the company's name.

B If there is an **error** in a URL you have been given and it appears not to work, you may still be able to make contact.

- ◆ If there are two or more words or names involved, bear in mind that they may need to be separated by a hyphen.

URLs may also include the tilde (~), which is sometimes confused with the hyphen.

- ◆ If there appears to be a space in the URL, this is a mistake. Spaces are not allowed in web addresses.
- ◆ If the failed URL you have ends in [.htm](http://www.htm), try [.html](http://www.html) instead. And vice versa.
- ◆ Try omitting the www. that features in most Internet addresses — or adding it in, if it is not there.

5 Finding email addresses

There are no centralised public sources to help you track down addresses, at home or abroad.

A Using the web to find an **individual's email address** can present problems.

- ◆ Email directories include Yahoo! People Search (<http://people.yahoo.com>), Bigfoot (<http://uk.bigfoot.com>) and WhoWhere? (www.whowhere.lycos.com). But they are far from comprehensive and generally have more American addresses than UK ones.
- ◆ Try MESA (<http://mesa.rzn.uni-hannover.de>), a little-known German site.

This automatically searches leading US directories and several European ones, quickly and all at the same time.

B Finding **company email addresses** is usually much easier, as most businesses naturally want to be found and contacted.

- ◆ The best British source is probably Yell, the Yellow Pages website (www.yell.com).

6 The pitfalls

Although the Internet is a useful and ever-expanding resource, it does have a number of drawbacks.

A There is **no quality control** on the Internet. It can be difficult to know if information is correct or reliable.

- ◆ Only base important decisions on information from well-known sources (such as newspapers or industry bodies).

B The abundance of information sources can lead to **time wasting**.

- ◆ Define the sort of information you want, how much data you really need to answer your question, and how much time you are prepared to spend looking.
- ◆ The information specialist at your local Business Link (www.businesslink.gov.uk) may undertake Internet searches for you. There may be a fee for this service.

C There can be **too much information** to evaluate and assimilate.

- ◆ Newsgroups and mailing list servers often generate hundreds of messages in a day. Always make a note of the instructions when you join a mailing list, so you have them in case you want to unsubscribe.
- ◆ Use your email software's filter function to organise email into folders and to delete irrelevant messages automatically.

D It may be difficult to determine that there is simply **no information** which is relevant.

- ◆ You can sometimes be fooled by the limitless amount of information that appears to be available on the Internet. For example, a search for 'windows' will return many thousands of matches, but only one in, perhaps, 200 will be about sash windows.

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