

By Carole Levitt

How to Access Public Library Databases for Research Purposes

Attorneys can use library databases to find what they might otherwise have to pay for

It is now commonplace for a library to post its card catalog free on the Internet. This catalog (referred to as an OPAC—Online Public Access Catalog) allows Internet users to peruse a library's catalog at their homes or offices and locate a book before having to travel to the library to retrieve it. To add to the convenience, many OPACs even show whether the book is available for checkout.

The newest development in this welcome trend is that libraries are now providing library patrons with free remote access to select databases, including for-pay databases. For the most part, these databases are not legal research databases but instead are business, news, investigative, and financial databases that contain information that often proves necessary to the practice of law. The wealth of factual information found in these databases can augment an attorney's research and can be used for client development.

The availability of remote access to databases varies widely from library to library. To find out which public libraries offer

database access, visit their Web sites. To find a public library's URL, use the Lib Web site (found at <http://sunsite.berkeley.edu/Libweb>). If a library does have remote access, users must have a library card. (Some libraries also require a password, which typically is one's zip code.) Obtaining a card is easy—it too can be done over the Web at many library Web sites. However, one must retrieve the card in person, not remotely. Once the card is in hand, however, entering the library card number into the library's remote access database Web page opens the door to a wealth of free information.

It is wise to visit a few library sites to review their offerings before deciding where to apply for a library card. A logical place to start is the Los Angeles Public Library (LAPL). The remote databases available at LAPL are listed at <http://databases.lapl.org>. To view an alphabetical list of remote databases (and some additional ones available only at the library's in-house computers) click on the menu at the bottom of the page.

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Each database has an indication of whether it allows remote access, access only at the Central Library, or access at the Central Library and the branches. LAPL's database site also offers a subject guide to the available databases and a link to a descriptive list of the databases.

LAPL's remote access databases include:

- American Business Disc (Reference USA), which lists

more than 12 million companies compiled from nationwide yellow pages, searchable by name, industry, geographic location, or size. This database also allows for searches of more than 120 million residential listings.

- Associations Unlimited: This database offers descriptions of more than 135,000 international and U.S. national, regional, state, and local membership organizations in all fields.

- Biography Resource Center: This is a comprehensive database of biographical information on more than 275,000 individuals. Compiled from many sources, the database includes the complete Marquis *Who's Who*.

- Business & Company Resource Center (Infotrac/Gale): This resource unifies company profiles, company brand information, rankings, investment reports, company histories, chronologies, and periodicals.

- Business Resources (Gale): This lists roughly 200,000 U.S. companies, along with company histories, essays regarding 54 industrial categories, industry statistics, market share reports, and company rankings.

- California Manufacturers Register (Harris InfoSource): This database offers researchers in-depth information on 37,000 California companies and can be searched and sorted by fields.

- General Business File ASAP: This searchable database offers general, health, and business sections; abstracts; and full-text periodicals.

- General Reference Center: This database provides access to full-text articles and images of articles from most general inter-

est magazines, reference books, and newspapers.

- Infotrac One File (Gale): Users can search this database for news and periodical articles on business, computers, current events, economics, education, environmental issues, health, hobbies, humanities, law, literature and art, politics, science, social science, sports, and technology.

- Investext: This offers the complete texts of more than 750,000 international company and industry reports published by approximately 320 of the world's leading investment banks, brokerage firms, and consulting and research firms.

- Los Angeles Times (News Bank): This service provides the complete, full-text content of the newspaper's local and regional news stories. Paid advertisements are excluded.

- *Oxford English Dictionary*: Rather than struggle with heavy volumes, users can search this online version of the 20-volume *Oxford English Dictionary*, Second Edition, and the 3 supplemental volumes.

- *Physicians' Desk Reference* (PDR): This pharmaceutical reference includes prescription and nonprescription drugs, and *Stedman's Medical Dictionary*.

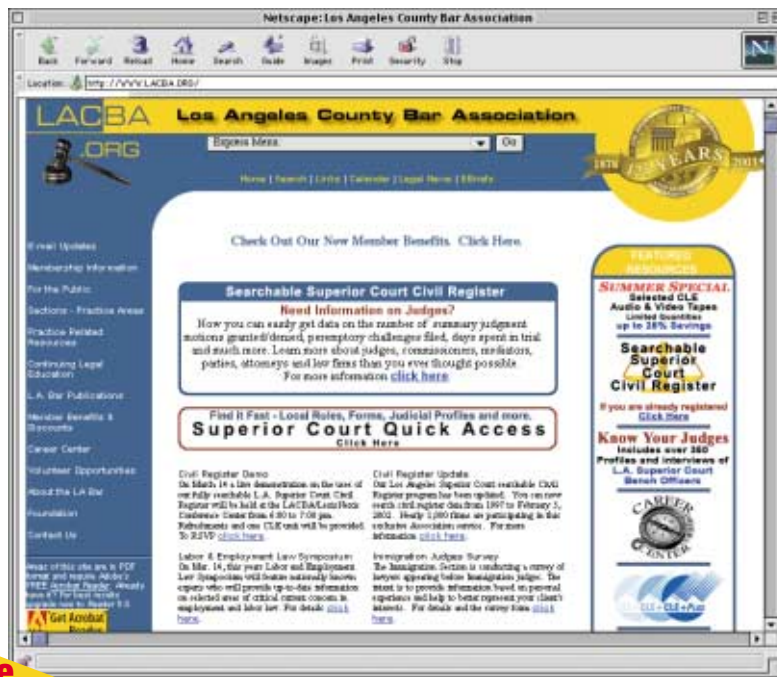
- Proquest General Interest Magazines: This database offers citations, abstracts, and the full text of academic and popular publications.

- Standard and Poor's Net Advantage: This database contains descriptive and financial data on U.S. and non-U.S. corporations. Three files are provided: Executives, Private Companies, and Public Companies.

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• *World Book Encyclopedia*: This reference offers information on a range of topics.

LAPL has no residency requirements for obtaining a library card, which is free. An attorney who resides outside of the city of Los Angeles can apply for a card at LAPL by visiting <http://librarycard.lapl.org>. For those who do not mind paying a \$100 fee, the New York Public Library (NYPL) also allows outside residents to apply for a library card. (See <http://www.nypl.org/branch/idescriptions.html> for a list of NYPL's remote databases.) However, to this expense one must also add the cost of a plane ticket to New York, because users must retrieve the card in person. Just

as there are no geographical boundaries on the Internet, often few or none exist for library membership.

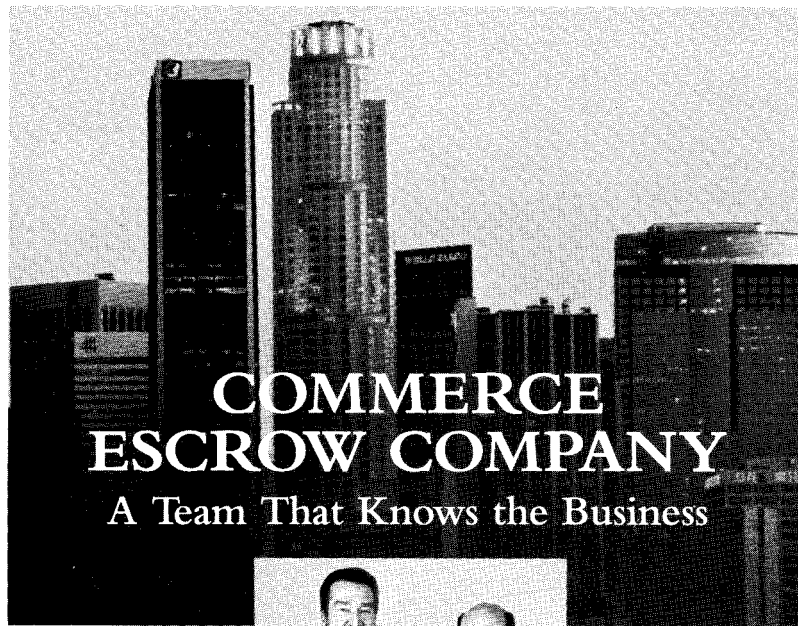
Potential Uses

Attorneys often need to investigate the background of clients, the opposition, or an expert witness. After searching through the usual legal research sources such as case law and dockets, searching for factual information is in order. LAPL's full-text newspaper article databases are useful for this. For example, while investigating the background of a Los Angeles securities broker, I first ran his name through the Los Angeles Times News

Bank but found nothing. I turned to a broader database, InfoTrac, which includes 32,564,086 articles from domestic and international newspapers and magazines (updated daily). In an Arizona newspaper article, I found that he had defrauded clients in Arizona before moving on to California. I also learned that his license had been suspended. This search took a few minutes, cost nothing, and saved me from dealing with him. To search InfoTrac efficiently, reading the Help screens is advised. InfoTrac allows keyword and proximity searching and allows users to manipulate results lists into detailed lists of subtopics.

Information gleaned from many of these remote databases can serve as client development tools. Using the factual and statistical information found in the business- and finance-oriented remote databases, one can gather competitive intelligence about people, products, and companies. Using this intelligence can assist one in finding and targeting potential clients. For example, an attorney who wants to represent record labels in a particular geographic location with a specific sales volume can use RefUSA's Custom Report tool, which allows one to create a list of potential clients based upon specific criteria selected by the user to create a custom report. An attorney can select to search by the following criteria: 1) geographic location (city, state, or zip code), 2) SIC (Standard Industrial Classification) code (select the SIC code for record labels from a drop-down menu of SIC codes), and 3) sales volume (select the "sales volume" criteria). Once the criteria for the custom report is selected, a template is generated automatically and specific information can be entered into the report's template. In this example, I entered: 1) \$500,000 to \$1 million for sales volume, 2) seven zip codes for geographic location, and 3) SIC code 7389-47 for the record label classification. A report with eight companies that met all the criteria was then generated. It displayed the company name, address, phone and fax numbers, number of employees, and sales revenue. The report can be downloaded into an Excel spreadsheet, and from there an attorney can begin to market to this target group.

The convenience of being able to search remotely through the full text of so many databases for information and to read and print the information from one's office or home computer surpasses anything imagined even just a few years ago. To say that the free remote access to library databases is a valuable resource is an understatement. It not only saves a commute to the library, it allows access to amazing amounts of useful information for free and saves attorneys from investing in database subscriptions they need only occasionally. ■



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