

Public Libraries Briefcase

No. 14, March 2006

A publication of the BRASS Business Reference in Public Libraries Committee

Links updated November 2014.

Public Libraries Briefcase: Finding & Using Public Records

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Scope

Public records or public documents are defined "as those records maintained by government agencies that are open without restriction to public inspection either by statute or by tradition" (Sankey & Weber, p. 7). Public records are most frequently used to find information about businesses, such as financial condition, or about people, such as background checks. These are records of incidents or actions that are filed with a government agency for the purposes of disclosure. Business entities use public records for environmental scanning and to gather intelligence about the competition, while individuals may use the information for making investment decisions, to find out about local businesses and contractors, and to conduct genealogy research.

Accessibility

The challenge in finding and using public records is one of accessibility. Regulated by individual state statutes access to specific categories of records is restricted in some states while in others the same records are open and unrestricted. The categories of public records most frequently impacted by individual state code include criminal histories, vehicle ownership and workmen's compensation claims – areas related to personnel background checks. Additionally the overall inconsistencies of what agencies in which states make public records available online can make the search for information frustrating.

Public records do not equate to free information, especially if the resources are maintained by private enterprises. Government agencies may charge for cost recovery, searching, photocopying, and certification fees. Public record vendors with proprietary databases frequently charge clients for "on demand" searches and for purchase or lease of database access. The cost of accessing public records ranges from modest fees for photocopying at the local court house to expensive subscriptions for proprietary databases.

Public, Personal or Private

As previously mentioned, public records are those which are filed with a government agency. However, public information is that information which the individual or business makes readily available for the purposes of communication, such as listings in a telephone directory. Much of this may be easily and readily available

through an array of resources and found without much difficulty, either through print sources or basic Internet searches.

Personal information is that information about a person or a business that may be considered private and confidential in nature. The person or business entity has expectations that the information will remain private unless it is disclosed to some outside entity that could make it public. The primary ways by which personal information enters the public domain are: by voluntary release by the individual; or, by statutory transactions because of legal requirements. Personal information, especially if it is part of a statutory transaction, such as applying for a loan, will become part of the public record.

Private information is that information over which the individual or business maintains control. While proprietary information is similar to private information, it is owned by and is for the sole use of the organization which caused its creation, and it is protected by law from disclosure, such as trade secrets. Private information is the most difficult to locate without direct contact of the person or entity that controls it.

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Securities Class Action Clearinghouse (<http://securities.stanford.edu/>): This database organizes all federal class action lawsuits from 1996 to the present. It provides the user with full text reports of all filings and complaints relating to each case. The database is indexed chronologically by file date, alphabetically by company name, and geographically by court of appeals.

State and Local Government Website Index (<http://www.statelocalgov.net/index.cfm>): Perhaps the most comprehensive online directory to government websites, this index provides the user with links to every department website imaginable for each level of government. The user is brought one step closer to the public records sought by being connected with the appropriate government agency, from statewide offices to the smallest branch of a city or township.

Additional Resources

For the individual or the small business entrepreneur, the local newspaper provides a wealth of public information. Many newspapers, for example, feature weekly real estate transactions for both commercial and residential properties that include purchase price, address, name of seller and buyer, and in the case of commercial prop