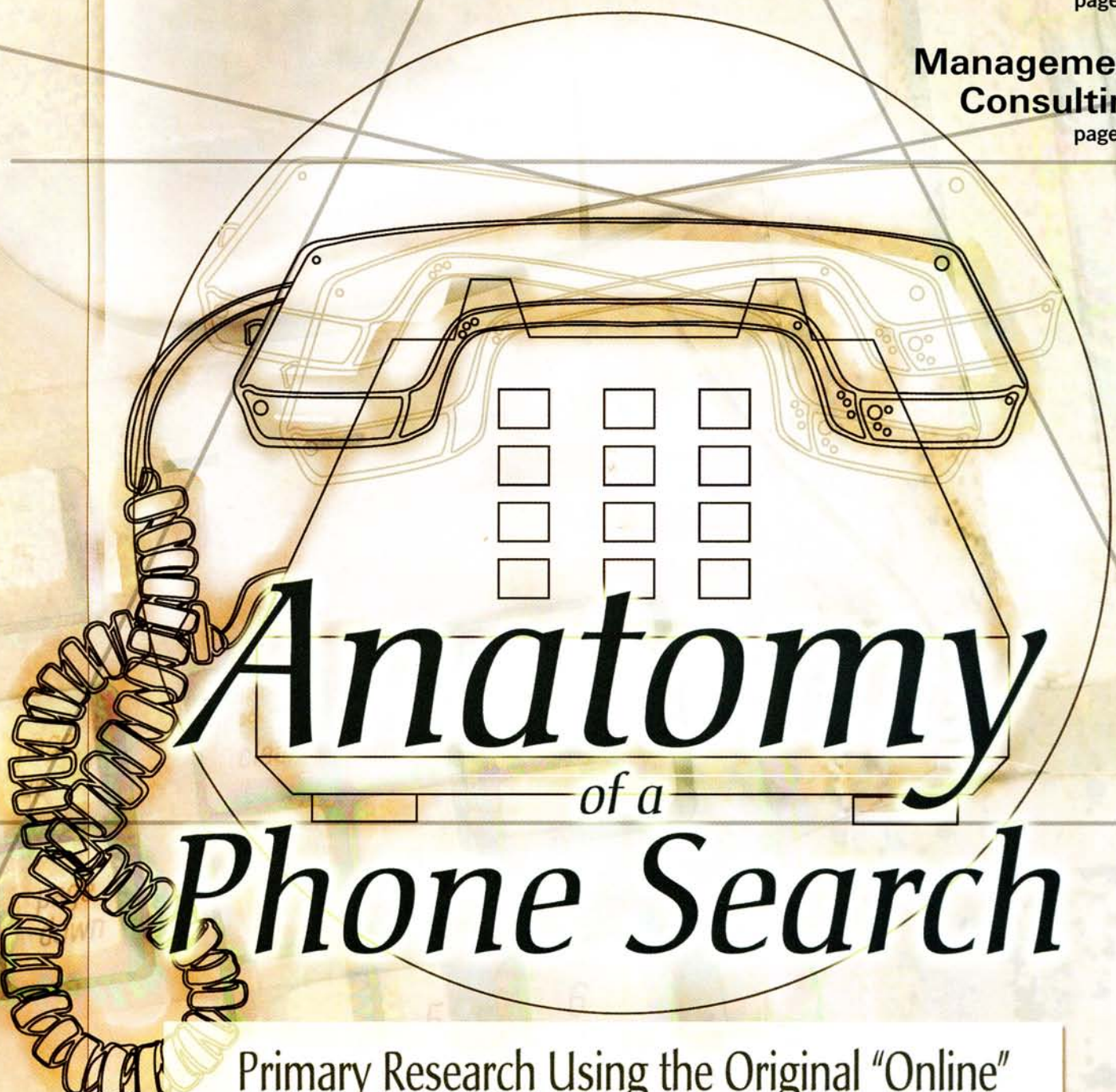


# SEARCHER

The Magazine for Database Professionals

**Macintosh Toolbars**  
page 18

**Management Consulting**  
page 48



# *Anatomy* *of a* *Phone Search*

Primary Research Using the Original "Online"

page 42



# *Anatomy* *of a* *Phone Search*

Primary Research Using the Original "Online"

by  
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***Before we begin,*** we need to dip into the quagmire of primary/secondary research definitions. It was never a completely simple dichotomy, and it's gotten even more murky with technological advances. I think we all agree that, for example, searching online for already published articles/books/papers, etc., constitutes secondary research. But what about viewing a Webcast? Finding information in a blog? Having or monitoring an e-mail exchange? In this article, we'll define primary research as interviewing "experts" to get the information you need. Your "expert" may be a physicist who has developed a new theory, or the temporary receptionist at the switchboard who will give you the name and number of a company's R&D director. It may be someone who knows the answers you seek or someone who can point you on your way.

Primary research has not lost its status as a critical role in research as technology has advanced. In fact, in many ways, it's become more critical, though it may fit differently than before. In the past, you might start with the telephone, then with good background information, go online to do an efficient and cost-effective search. Today, with excellent and improving search capabilities and the free authoritative sources on the open Web, research frequently begins online to help define the field, find existing answers, and determine the "black holes" that only primary research can fill.

With secondary research, you can find the answers to questions that someone else has chosen to write about. With primary research you can find the answers to your exact questions — which is incredibly powerful. Because primary research is totally focused, you can get as specific or general as you need. Because it's interactive and live, you can get feelings, nuances, shades of meaning — and can clarify as you go along. Because it's immediate, your information can be incredibly up-to-date — literally up-to-the-minute. With primary research, you're creating something that did not exist before. If one good secondary researcher can find specific information, others can find it as well. But with primary research, by gathering original data, you may provide immense added value — a competitive edge that no one else has. And, as you would be quick to point out, since primary research doesn't exist until you create it, that makes you essential and non-removable. Even in a Google world, performing primary research makes you less vulnerable to technology taking over your job.

We'll talk more about qualities of good primary researchers at the end, but now, let's cut to the chase.

When something disappears off your radar, is it gone or just submerged? Let me give you an example. I received an interesting question from a favorite researcher client tracking an international legal action. Online searching had proven a dead end. We could find nothing published since June 2002. Was the suit dismissed, or only sleeping, to rise again? The European Commission had investigated an alleged conspiracy by three drug companies to fix the price of an essential ingredient, started a probe, and seized some documents. The media had reported all this, but then — silence. My task was to dig deeper and get as close to the definitive story as possible.

Frequently, primary research projects can get convoluted, wide-ranging, and down right messy. But this one, with a limited budget and time frame, fell out beautifully, so it's a good choice to take you behind the scenes and follow the phone trail.

Note: All the names used from here on are fictitious to protect anonymity, except for a librarian in Quick Tips at the end

## **BEGIN ONLINE/DO MY HOMEWORK/ FIND SOURCES**

As with almost every phone project, research began online. My client, a top info pro, had already done the heavy online searching and sent me what results she had. Reading through her notes gave me some additional names and sources on which to do some quick

research. Two of the best sources were an article written mid-2002 on the earlier phases of the investigation and a listing for a European Commission Delegation library in Washington, D.C.

The article gave me background on the case, some basic terminology that would help me sound a little bit knowledgeable, and, most importantly, specific names. It had the author, his company, and a partial phone number, though no location or identification of where the phone number was. It also identified the general department of the EU commission dealing with the case, the name of an EU commissioner, and the name of a Brussels-based partner in a law firm dealing with these issues. A veritable treasure-trove.

The EC Delegation library reference in Washington, D.C., had a phone number, and — oh joy! — even the name of a librarian. That's pure gold to a telephone researcher. I read up on the investigation to get background on the case, players, EC procedures, and journalist covering the topic. I also did some quick reading on chemical price-fixing and anti-trust cases. With enough basics under my belt to at least be able to ask intelligent questions, my first stop was the librarian.

## FIRST CALLS

Given the choice, librarians are always my first call, since they tend to be friendly, research-oriented, and love to help chase down information. They also have loads of information at their fingertips and know how to access it. And this librarian fit the bill perfectly.

When I call, I generally identify myself, why I'm calling, and why I'm calling them specifically. I tend to keep my introduction brief and frequently that's all that's required.

If the person I'm calling wants more information, I'm very careful to have previously determined from the client exactly what I can say in terms of maintaining client confidentiality, and I keep strictly to those limits. Sometimes I can use the client name directly, and it can even help open doors — "I'm doing a research project for the Red Cross," or the Department of the Interior, or whomever. Sometimes I can only give general information like "for a major chemical producer." Sometimes the client's boundaries are even stricter. In fact, the desire to not disclose the name of the ultimate client may even be the reason the client has chosen to use a third-party interviewer. Then I say that because of client confidentiality, I can't tell them

anything further, and a surprising number of people are still willing to talk with you.

In this case, all that was required was: "Hi, Madeline [all real names changed, of course]. My name is Risa Sacks and I'm a researcher up in Massachusetts. I'm working on a project looking at the follow-up on the XYZ case and I wondered if you might help me identify whom I should talk to about it."

As hoped, she was fabulous. She accessed the identifying information about the case, provided the specific department within the EC (Director General Competitors Antitrust Registry), and gave me the direct phone number for the correct department in Brussels. That was a huge bonus, since it meant that I wouldn't have to wander my way through possibly interminable bureaucracies. Another bonus was that this phone number had a similar prefix and first digits to the phone number for the journalist, whose location I hadn't known. Disparate pieces of information began to come together, and each piece of information helped lead me to the next.

Before getting off the phone I asked my usual final questions — "Who else might know? Whom else might you suggest that I contact?" In this case, she provided the additional referral and number for the technical office involved (Chemicals, Minerals, Non-Ferrous Metals, Steel). That way if one office didn't answer, didn't know, or wouldn't help, I had at least one other line into the EC to try. I also had a possible way to cross-check information, which is as useful and necessary in primary research as in secondary research. I thanked her honestly and profusely — she had been wonderful and gone the extra step for me.

With specific numbers in hand, I was ready to tackle Brussels. I called the anti-trust office, and used my U.S. contact as a reference. "I'm a researcher over in the United States, and I was given your number by the EC Delegation Librarian in Washington, D.C. I'm interested in following up on XYZ case and she thought you would be the department who would know."

A few quick points about this particular example —

- I used the referral from my U.S. librarian — it says to people "I'm not just calling out of the blue; a fellow worker of yours was willing to help me; she thought you'd be the expert to talk with." Even the slimmest of referrals, "so and so gave me your number," works wonders — suddenly you have a level of legitimacy.
- When calling overseas, I use the fact that I'm calling from the U.S. I find that people are pleased that

someone took the trouble to make the international phone call.

- Identifying myself as American may cut me some slack, excusing any cultural errors I may make.
- People seem to be willing to tell things to Americans that they are less likely to discuss with more local interviewers, though I have no idea why; perhaps we're seen as less threatening because we're so geographically distant.

Yes, she'd be delighted to help. The person I should talk with was Chris Bryalt. He was the new case manager, having taken over just 6 weeks ago. Here was his number. He might be in a meeting for the next hour or so, but I could try him and leave a voicemail if he wasn't in.

Beautiful — many thanks!

## TO VOICE MAIL OR NOT?

Ideally, I'd save the case manager's call for last, after I'd done more preliminary research. But taking into account the time differences in calling Brussels, I decided to give Chris a try, hoping that he might be on a break from the meeting. He wasn't there, which was fine, since it gave me a chance to leave a brief voicemail message and let him know that I'd try him later.

"Hi Chris. The Director General's Office gave me your name and number and said that you'd be the person to talk to about XYZ." (Of course I pushed the Director General referral for all it was worth. You see the pattern emerging of using each referral to get you in the next door....)

In some cases, if the topic was very sensitive or if I thought the person might prove reluctant to speak with me, I might choose not to leave a voicemail — not give them any 'advance warning.' But in many cases, including this one, leaving a voicemail gets your name in the person's consciousness. When you call later, they feel a sense of responsibility to take your call, almost a sense of familiarity.

Generally, I'll leave no more than two voicemails — not wanting to be seen as a nuisance. Then I may call a dozen times — whatever it takes to get them — but not leave any additional messages. When they do finally pick up, I act as if this is my second or third call, tell them how happy I am to speak to them, and thank them for taking the call. If someone never seems to be there, I may try a secretary or the switchboard — someone who can confirm that the person really is there and not out on a month-long vacation — and

again ask if anyone else might be able to help me in their absence.

## MEET THE PRESS

Having planted the seed with the case manager, I moved on to the press — especially since now I had a bit of information to offer myself. The fact that there was a new case manager, his identity, and the timing of the handover were all "trading beads" — little pieces of information that the journalist might not have and that I could bring to the table.

I wasn't sure that the journalist number I had was really Brussels, but I tried it with the country and city codes for the EC and sure enough Jim Curtis answered.

"Hi Jim — I'm a researcher from the U.S., and I'm looking into the current status of XYZ case. I'm calling you because I read your excellent articles back in June 2002 and wanted to talk to you about it briefly. Are you on deadline right now?"

Journalists are usually so pleased that you were considerate enough to ask if they're on deadline, that they'll find a few minutes to talk with you or set up a time to talk later. They also appreciate that you've read and value their work. Who doesn't like honest adulation?

Jim graciously proceeded to give me quite a bit of time and information. In fact, he said that the call was a good reminder for him because we were just about to enter "the season of fines" — one of the two periods in the year when the EC most often levies charges. Because nothing had happened for so long, he thought it likely that there would be some movement soon. In addition, he gave me a great intro to how the processes and procedures of the EC Commission worked and the stages each case went through. Jim confirmed that he was probably the reporter who had covered the case most closely and that he had heard nothing since mid-2002. His assessment was that the fines would be heavy in this case, and, since the parties had already been found guilty in other venues, that the EC would not just drop the case.

I was able to share the news on the new case manager, said I had a call in to him, and offered to share anything else I found out. I now had a friend in the press. In this instance, I could share with Jim because I knew that any additional press scrutiny would delight my client — the more light on this matter, the better in this client's view. If it had been a case in which the client wanted a very low profile on the topic and rais-

## Quick Tips

To quickly review some of the major points demonstrated in this example:

- ✓ Begin with online searches to get background and references.
- ✓ Start your calls, when possible, with research professionals.  
(Librarians are always a great bet.)
- ✓ Here's some quick tips for finding librarians:  
On the American Library Association Web site [<http://www.ala.org>], try the new search engine. For example, putting in "African American" got me, among other results:  
[http://libwww.syr.edu/research/internet/african\\_american/index.html](http://libwww.syr.edu/research/internet/african_american/index.html).

Bonnie Ryan  
Bird Library, Room 210  
Phone: 315-443-4674  
Fax: 315-443-9510  
[bcryan@syr.edu](mailto:bcryan@syr.edu)

*(Yes, of course I called Bonnie to ask her if it was OK to list her in this article.)*

If you're a member of a research group, such as SLA, search your membership directory.

Search the Web site of any organization you may be contacting. For example, searching the University of Notre Dame provided a complete list of subject librarians from African American Studies through Theology, including names and phone numbers: [http://www.library.nd.edu/directory/public\\_directory.cgi?page=subjbrowse](http://www.library.nd.edu/directory/public_directory.cgi?page=subjbrowse).

Explore the *Gale Directory of Special Libraries and Information Centers* by topic, name, or geographic location: <http://www.galegroup.com/servlet/BrowseSeriesServlet?region=9&imprint=000&titleCode=DSL&edition>.

- ✓ Identify yourself, why you are calling, and why you are calling that specific person.
- ✓ Get as specific information as possible on other departments, names, e-mail identities, and phone numbers to call.
- ✓ Ask for any additional recommendations and referrals.
- ✓ Use each referral to open the next door — and push high-level referrals for all they are worth.
- ✓ Play the "American" card.
- ✓ Leave simple voicemail messages when necessary.
- ✓ Ask journalists if they are on deadline.
- ✓ Use information "trading beads" to offer something of value and make the call mutually beneficial.
- ✓ Offer to share additional information and follow through on that promise.
- ✓ Let experts talk within their comfort zones and speak in generalities. You can still tie that information back to specific cases yourself.
- ✓ Check information both internally and among both printed and personal sources and double-check your own biases.
- ✓ Report both your findings and your evaluation of the validity and usefulness of those findings to your client.
- ✓ Provide additional avenues for continued research, if desired.

As a quick review of some of the major points demonstrated in this example, I did the following:

- ✓ Began online to get background and references
- ✓ Started my calls to a research professional (librarians are always a great bet).
- ✓ Identified myself, why I was calling, and why I was calling that particular person, being careful at all times to work within the guidelines of my client's needs and requirements

ing any red flags would have been a negative, I would have taken a different approach.

## THE SOURCE'S MOUTH

When I called the case manager back, Chris was there, said he'd gotten my message, and was happy to talk with me. I began by confirming my understanding of the background of the case and that he had just taken over the case 6 weeks ago. He said he couldn't comment on the case directly since it was still an open case — confirming that the case had not been, and was not, in the immediate future, being dropped. I assured him that I understood and didn't want him to compromise anything (unless he felt absolutely compelled to give me some inside scoop, in which case, I'd be happy to listen....).

Talking in generalities was fine, since everything we discussed applied to this particular case as well. Chris gave me an excellent view of the timeline for the progress of a case and how long each stage can take. I mentioned Jim's "seasons of fines," sounding very in-the-know, and he confirmed the general time tables. When I commented that since he had just taken the case over, it sounded like it would be very difficult for anything to happen as quickly as the upcoming season of fines, he responded that while he couldn't comment directly, that was probably a safe inference. Also when I asked if it were likely to hit by the next "season," he again declined to state it in so many words, but said that this was not an unreasonable conclusion to draw — coming as close as possible to definitive statements, adding, "I've told you the situation, and you can draw your own conclusions from everything that we've said."

I told him what a pleasure it had been talking with him and how much I appreciated his time and input. He really had been a delight and a font of information. I also made sure that it would be all right to call him back if I had any further questions. He was pleased that I cared so much, had some background knowledge and understanding, and was such an avid pupil. We parted as a mutual admiration society.

## CLOSING THE CIRCLE

As I'd promised my reporter, I called Jim back with the latest information I had obtained. He confirmed that everything that Chris said made sense to him and

fell in line with everything he'd heard/read/knew. His interest was piqued and he felt that there was definitely a major story there. Jim promised to keep this on his radar, follow up on the story, and share with me any new developments that he discovered.

### EVALUATING AND PRESENTING

With time and budget running out, I needed to evaluate and decide how to proceed. Did we know enough for now? Did I feel comfortable enough to report? ("Enough" being the operable word here.) Just as with online searches, given world enough and time, there's always more you'd love to know — but all-in-all, a very satisfactory outcome for my client.

We knew that the case was still active, knew why no action had been taken as yet (change of personnel), had a fair degree of certainty that there would be no immediate action, and based on the seasons, knew no action was probable until about 7–9 months down the road, and had a pretty good indication that action would likely occur then.

In the course of assessing the degree of validity and trustworthiness of my information, I considered who the sources were, where they were coming from, and my own sense of their competence, openness, and internal consistency. I also had to look at any biases of my own — it's easy enough to "fall" for an appealing source and be too ready to accept what you want to hear.

My sense was that our information was internally consistent within what each respondent provided. It was also consistent between "insider" and "outsider" — where neither had a particular ax to grind, as far as I could tell, and each had gotten their information from disparate sources. Both people had really sounded like "experts" — totally conversant on their topic, fluent, forthcoming, and pretty upfront about what they could and could not say. Given more time and budget, I might have loved a third source as insurance (well a fourth and fifth would always have been nice as well — my perpetual longing for "just one more"), but I felt that I could provide the client with this information as a good basis for them to start with. In addition, I provided a number of other sources that we could check if they wanted to go further with the research, as well as my assessment, complete with caveats, of course, of the validity of what I could provide.

### THE INVITATION AND CHALLENGE

Using primary telephone research allowed my client, another information professional, to present her client with a much more complete solution than online alone could provide. In fact, if she had just relied on online, her results were seeming to indicate that the case was dead. One of my client's strengths, apart from being a mind-boggling online searcher, is her sharp sense of when to bring primary research into the mix. She knows that no written news isn't necessarily good or bad news, it could just be no news. It definitely isn't the last word!

We've all had occasions when the answer, or the complete answer, just isn't online. That isn't the end of the possibilities, just the start of the next research phase.

Is there some project you're dealing with now that could benefit from going "beyond online"? Is there a project in the past that you've always wanted a bit (or a lot) more information on? If so, you might want to send out a favorite or particularly thorny problem in which primary research might help. Or you might want to try doing it yourself. (If my agency could help, get in touch with us. In any case, I would love to hear about any interesting experiences in doing primary research.)

To be a good phone researcher, it's useful to have incredible tenacity — you often have to make a dozen calls to get that one critical bit of information; a thick skin (for when you get rejected); sensitivity (to focus completely on the person with whom you're talking and know when to push and when to back off); and great preparation. If you blow an online search, you can re-run it, but with a phone call, you usually just get the one chance. Most of all you need the love of the chase. Many of these qualities are common to both primary and secondary research.

The challenge is to broaden your scope and use your online skills and current information as a springboard to expand your options. Consider including phone research to provide a more complete answer. If you hate primary research (as some of the best secondary researchers do), get another researcher to help with that phase of the process. It could be a colleague at work or you could find a telephone research specialist through an organization like the Association of Independent Information Professionals [<http://www.aiip.org>]. However you do it, adding primary research to your research arsenal and remembering the option to "go live" and actually talk to experts can expand your research universe, increase the depth and breadth of your research radar, and enrich your results. ♦

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