



# Backgrounding Businesses on the Internet

Michelle Gilchrist  Senior Staff Librarian  San Diego Union-Tribune  
[michelle.gilchrist@uniontrib.com](mailto:michelle.gilchrist@uniontrib.com)



Public records are designed to protect the public by providing notice of facts or legal interests. They register assets, financial actions, business relationships, political and charitable contributions, court actions and vital statistics. Most public records online only index documents available elsewhere. Commercial vendors generally offer more complete records than free Web sources, but coverage and currency varies by location.

## Locators & Directories

Search for the company's web site, address and phone number. Also look for trade associations and professional organizations.

- ☆ [Google](#), [Yahoo](#), <http://clusty.com/> and other search engines - Look for the company's web site, address, phone number and news.
- ☆ [www.superpages.com](http://www.superpages.com) - Yellow pages to locate businesses. Profile may be available.
- ☆ [www.business.com/](http://www.business.com/) - Search more than 400,000 listings.
- ☆ [dsbs.sba.gov/dsbs/dsp\\_dsbs.cfm](http://dsbs.sba.gov/dsbs/dsp_dsbs.cfm) - Millions of small businesses register with this government agency to receive benefits or qualify for contracts.

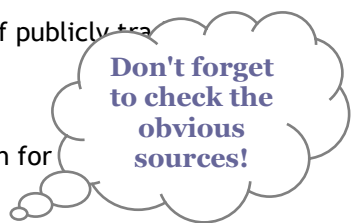
## Corporation and Limited Partnerships, Fictitious Business Names (FBNs)

Business filings can provide varied information. At the very least, an address and a registered agent may be provided.

- ☆ [www.nass.org/](http://www.nass.org/) - National Association of Secretary of States gateway to state Web sites.
- ☆ [www.search.bbb.org/](http://www.search.bbb.org/) - Search for Better Business Bureau Reliability Reports.
- ☆ FBNs - Filings may be available online at county Web sites.
  - San Diego County - [http://www.sdarcc.com/arcc/online\\_services.aspx](http://www.sdarcc.com/arcc/online_services.aspx)
  - Orange County - [cr.ocgov.com/fbn/index.asp](http://cr.ocgov.com/fbn/index.asp)
  - Los Angeles County - [http://regrec.co.la.ca.us/CLERK/FBN\\_Search.cfm](http://regrec.co.la.ca.us/CLERK/FBN_Search.cfm) ;
  - Riverside County - <http://riverside.asfclrkrec.com/ACR/OSfbn.asp>
  - San Bernardino - <http://170.164.50.51/fbn/index.html>

## Financial

- ☆ [www.hoovers.com](http://www.hoovers.com) - Search for businesses and executives. Some free information available. (\$)
- ☆ [www.dnb.com/us/](http://www.dnb.com/us/) - Business profiles and reports. (\$)
- ☆ [www.sec.gov/](http://www.sec.gov/), [www.secinfo.com/](http://www.secinfo.com/) and [www.10kwizard.com/](http://www.10kwizard.com/) - Search SEC filings of publicly traded companies. Key SEC filings:
  - 10-K - Annual filings.
  - 10-Q - Quarterly filings. Search for *list of exhibits*.
  - 8-K - Disclosure of information to stockholders, an official press release. Search for things that can influence stock prices.
  - 144 - Notice of stock sale.
  - S-1 - IPO statement.
  - DEF 14A - Proxy statement contains executive compensation and a list of the largest shareholders. Search for *executive compensation*, *certain relationships* and *special purpose entities*.
- ☆ [www.ss.ca.gov/business/business.htm](http://www.ss.ca.gov/business/business.htm) - The CA SOS site for publicly traded corporation disclosures.
- ☆ [lopucki.law.ucla.edu](http://lopucki.law.ucla.edu) - Bankruptcies involving public companies from 1980.
- ☆ [corporateinformation.com](http://corporateinformation.com) - Profiles and analysis.
- ☆ [finance.yahoo.com](http://finance.yahoo.com) - Profiles, financial information and analysis.
- ☆ [www.dailystocks.com/](http://www.dailystocks.com/) - Stock research.
- ☆ [www.reportgallery.com/](http://www.reportgallery.com/) - Over 2,200 annual reports.
- ☆ [www.ragingbull.com/](http://www.ragingbull.com/) - A collection of financial message boards.
- ☆ [www.cfonews.com/scs/](http://www.cfonews.com/scs/) - Releases from more than 80 companies.



## Nonprofit Organizations

- ☆ [www.guidestar.org/](http://www.guidestar.org/) - Premier Web site for researching nonprofits. Register to view 990 filings which detail income, expenses, assets and liabilities.
- ☆ [apps.irs.gov/app/pub78](http://apps.irs.gov/app/pub78) - Search IRS Publication 78 to see if an organization is registered as a 501(c)(3).
- ☆ [www.charitynavigator.org/](http://www.charitynavigator.org/) - Independent evaluations of more than 3,700 charities.
- ☆ [www.give.org/](http://www.give.org/) - Evaluation reports of nationally soliciting organizations from BBB Wise Giving Alliance.
- ☆ [www.nonprofits.org/](http://www.nonprofits.org/) - Information for and about nonprofits.

### **Licenses**

Check various licensing agencies. Is your business regulated by a specific agency? Many agencies list not only information about the business, but also list employees and their license numbers.

- ☆ [www.abc.ca.gov/datport/LQSMENU.html](http://www.abc.ca.gov/datport/LQSMENU.html) - California state liquor licensing board lists license and disciplinary information.
- ☆ [www.dre.ca.gov/licstats.htm](http://www.dre.ca.gov/licstats.htm) - California real estate licenses.
- ☆ [www.barbercosmo.ca.gov/license.htm](http://www.barbercosmo.ca.gov/license.htm) - California barber and cosmetology licenses.

### **Courts & Enforcement**

Many court records are available, but it is impossible to do a complete court records search online.

- ☆ [pacer.psc.uscourts.gov/](http://pacer.psc.uscourts.gov/) - Pacer - Federal cases. PDFs are available for some cases. \$.08 per page. (\$)
- ☆ [www.naag.org/](http://www.naag.org/) - National Association of Attorneys General.
- ☆ [www.pretrieve.com/](http://www.pretrieve.com/) - Public records search engine.
- ☆ [www.usdoj.gov/](http://www.usdoj.gov/) - Department of Justice lists certain prominent cases online.
- ☆ [www.fda.gov/](http://www.fda.gov/) - The Federal Drug Agency lists enforcement activities.
- ☆ [www.nlr.gov/](http://www.nlr.gov/) - The National Labor Relations Board lists board decisions, orders and case summaries.
- ☆ County courts - Dockets and full court records are online in some counties.
  - San Diego County - [www.sdcourt.ca.gov/](http://www.sdcourt.ca.gov/)
  - Los Angeles County - [www.lasuperiorcourt.org/](http://www.lasuperiorcourt.org/)
  - Sacramento County - [www.saccourt.com/](http://www.saccourt.com/)

### **Meta Sites**

Meta sites offer multiple searches, including public records and skip tracing. Some free, some for a fee.

- ☆ [www.searchsystems.net](http://www.searchsystems.net) - Largest directory of links to free public records on the Internet.
- ☆ [www.melissadata.com/](http://www.melissadata.com/) - Good people finder and other information by area. (\$)
- ☆ [www.merlindata.com/](http://www.merlindata.com/) - Good for Southern California public records. \$100 to open an account. (\$)

### **News**

Search news sources, especially local, for news releases, articles and profiles. Trade publications and associations can also be a good source of information.

- ☆ [www.forbes.com/](http://www.forbes.com/), [www.fortune.com/](http://www.fortune.com/), [www.prnewswire.com/](http://www.prnewswire.com/), [www.bizwire.com/](http://www.bizwire.com/), [www.topix.net/business](http://www.topix.net/business), [www.rocketnews.com/](http://www.rocketnews.com/), [www.ft.com/](http://www.ft.com/), [www.corporatewindow.com/](http://www.corporatewindow.com/) - Articles, financial profiles, press releases and stock quotes.

### **Resources for Reporters**

- ☆ [www.ire.org/](http://www.ire.org/) - IRE
- ☆ [www.specialissues.com/lol](http://www.specialissues.com/lol) - Gary Price's List of Lists - Comparison reports.
- ☆ [knowledge.wharton.upenn.edu/index.cfm](http://knowledge.wharton.upenn.edu/index.cfm) - Information, research and interviews from Wharton School, University of Pennsylvania.
- ☆ <http://www.experts.com/> - List of experts.
- ☆ [profnet2.prnewswire.com](http://profnet2.prnewswire.com) - Register for access to experts.
- ☆ [www.virtualchase.com/](http://www.virtualchase.com/) - Articles, guides and teaching aids.

### **Other Tips**

If the business regulated by a government agency, working with a government agency, receiving funds? Check local and government agencies for ties. Check HUD, OSHA, EPA and the FDA Web sites for information on businesses, fines and penalties. Check the business tax section of your city for information on local businesses.

Vendors such as LexisNexis, Accurant, AutoTrack and ChoicePoint provide subscribers with access to multiple public records including corporation filings, bankruptcies, liens and lawsuits.