

How to overcome Web research roadblocks

The Web is packed with information, but don't assume it's the latest or best.

Professional researcher Risa Sacks says that writers can get tripped up by these five misconceptions about the Internet as a research tool.

Misconception #1: The Web is quick and free. The Web can produce quick answers, but not on every topic. When your search comes up empty, switch to other research tactics:

- Call experts;
- Try a variety of search engines;
- Go to fee-based services such as Nexis-Lexis and Dialog, which have more robust searching technology.

As for Web searches being free, consider what your time is worth. If finding a complete answer is critical—for instance, millions are riding on it—it's cheaper to pay a professional than risk missing something, Sacks says. One place to find professional researchers is The Association of Independent Information Professionals (www.aiip.org).

Misconception #2: If it's not on the Web, it doesn't exist. Your search terms may not lead to the right Web pages, so try different methods of choosing those terms. Be aware of synonyms, antonyms and American vs. British spelling and terminology. Remember, too, that both pre-Web and brand-new information may not be on the Web.

"What you can find on the Internet are answers to questions someone else has chosen to write about. The question you need the answer to might have a different slant or different parameters," she says.

Check with an expert. You may be asking the question the wrong way, or that expert may have done a study on the identical question. Some experts may rerun their report to your parameters.

Misconception #3: If it's on the Web, it must be true and valuable. Identify viable sources by being a critical thinker. Avoid organizations that may be biased. If several people say the same thing, confirm that they're not all getting their information from the same single source. Find out what else your sources say. If a Web site contains unlikely facts, move on. If experts make competing points, call them and ask why they differ.

To find authoritative answers to your questions, try professional associations, private companies, local government agencies and organizations such as the chamber of commerce.

Misconception #4: All information on the Web is up to date. Look for dates indicating when the information was posted.

Also check for internal clues. If a site reports that oil has hit \$100 per barrel, call the site's operators and ask for an update on your topic. Call even if the information is recent. They may have later research to share, giving you information no one else has.

Misconception #5: What I find on the Web is all I need to know. The Web doesn't reveal the nuances that tell you what an expert or researcher really thinks about the topic. Use phone research to verify and clarify what you find.

WTW West Coast correspondent Judy Artunian interviewed Risa Sacks, owner, Risa Sacks Information Services; 508/852-8686; Risa@RisaSacks.com; www.risasacks.com. She is the author of *Super Searchers Go to the Source: The Interviewing and Hands-On Information Strategies of Top Primary Researchers-Online, on the Phone and In Person* (Cyberage Books, 2001).

Look for images

Search the Web for videotaped press conferences and presentations to see how experts and executives present themselves, Risa Sacks advises. "You can get a sense of who this person is. Is he making sense? Does he have gravitas?"

Photos can help with visual subject matter. For instance, Sacks did a photo search when researching competitive pricing for a client selling handbags with horse-themed designs. Search for photos, video and other nontext resources via sites such as Google Image Search, Technorati, IceRocket, Yahoo! Audio Search and FindWebEvents.

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