

## Dear Friends:

Few innovations in the last decade have affected the way we live as profoundly as the Internet. The "information superhighway" has paved the way for new businesses, created new revenue streams for existing businesses (for example, Szabo represents internet advertising companies, and also a number of our traditional clients sell advertising and merchandise on their Web sites), and provides tools for conducting business (such as information that can help credit managers do their job more efficiently). On the last point, this issue's feature article describes what we consider some of the best Web sites for free information on your prospects and customers.

And speaking of the Internet, please note that Szabo's Web site and e-mail address have changed. Look for us at [www.szabo.com](http://www.szabo.com) or e-mail us at [info@szabo.com](mailto:info@szabo.com)

Please also note our upcoming calendar of events: NAB, April 19th through 20th in Las Vegas, Nevada; Broadcast Cable Financial Management Association, May 17th through 20th in Las Vegas; and the Szabo Employee Summer Picnic, June 5th in Conyers, Georgia.

Best wishes for a wonderful spring!



Pete Szabo, President  
Szabo Associates, Inc.

## Cruising the Information Superhighway ... A Hitchhiker's Guide to Credit Information

As recently as the late '80's, who among us believed that, before the year 2000, a universe of network-accessible information would be available to us through our personal computers? Yet in 1991, the World Wide Web became available, and the ability to put together words, pictures, and sounds on Web pages created vast new potential for publishing information. By 1996, the Internet had further matured to become the "information superhighway," a conduit to a virtual library of human knowledge. And as our industry prepares to enter the new millenium, with the Age of the Internet in full swing, more and more media credit managers are realizing that a wealth of information on customers and prospective customers lies only a few mouse clicks away.

Of course, anyone who has recently "surfed the net" knows that the number of sites and services available over the Internet can be overwhelming, it takes patience to navigate through the possibilities, and it is often impossible to know the worth of a particular site or service without time-consuming investigation. That's why Szabo Associates has poked around, read editorial reviews, and compiled what we think is a rather useful list of sources for free information on companies.

First, a few words about Web sites that charge for company information: While the well-known credit-rating services

Dun & Bradstreet (<http://www.dnb.com/>) and Experian (formerly TRW) (<http://www.experian.com>) charge fees for their reports, it can be worth your while to check out these two sites to see what they have to offer. For example, Experian's "Snapshot" Report for about \$15 might include a small business's legal filings, payment behavior and trends, company history and financial services history. D&B's Business Background Report for about \$20 provides information about the operations of a company located in the U.S., its history and business background of its management. Additionally, D&B has a number of links to useful—and free—credit-related information. CreditFYI (<http://www.creditfyi.com/>) is a new Internet service that offers, for about \$15, an on-line "one-screen" overview of your small business customer's credit history, including a risk rating that evaluates the business's relative likelihood of paying its bills on time. CreditFYI is the product of an alliance between Fair, Isaac, a company that pioneered the use of credit scoring in consumer and commercial lending, and Net Earnings, an Internet company that specializes in providing financial services to small businesses. Its underlying trade credit data comes from Experian. CreditFYI is targeted to small companies that need to

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# Information Superhighway—

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make quick, accurate, and informed decisions about extending trade credit to other small businesses (sales of less than \$5 million), including sole proprietorships, partnerships, and corporations in all types of industries.

Now, for the free stuff, in alphabetical order. This is by no means a comprehensive listing of sources. The Web universe is extremely dynamic, with new sites being created and existing ones being expanded almost daily. Additionally, there are numerous sites that offer information on particular industries, which we cannot include here.

## **Annual Report Gallery:**

<http://www.reportgallery.com/>  
This site allows you to view about 1,000 annual reports online. It also provides company data from Zacks Investment Research and links to corporate home pages, all at no cost. The list is alphabetized; you simply click on the first letter of the company of interest, then scroll down to it. Some listings have links to annual reports of several years past in addition to the most current. Those with a "Z" in the margin allow you to directly access a Zacks "Wall Street Snapshot" report, with data such as earnings estimates, broker recommendations, and annual income statements and balance sheets. The Gallery's "Financial Search" option links to Web sites providing published information and articles on the company. Some of these sites require you to register (free) to access the information. Contentwise, we don't think this site holds a candle to some others listed in this article; however, if the company you're interested in is listed here, the

fact that you can view its annual report and other relevant information for free makes it worth your time.

## **CompaniesOnline:**

<http://www.companiesonline.com/>  
Dun & Bradstreet and Lycos have partnered to publish this free data on more than 75,000 U.S. and private companies. Information includes company addresses, e-mail, phone numbers, contact names and titles, ownership structure, sales volume statistics, number of employees, the company's web addresses (with direct links), and more. There is also a link to order a Dun & Bradstreet Business Background Report (\$20). To get full access to free information, registration (at no cost) is required.

CompaniesOnline allows you to either Search by Criteria (company name, etc.) or Browse by Industry (it provides a list). When searching by criteria, you can enter partial words or phrases, and the engine will pull up all companies that match those word fragments. The search function also offers pull-down boxes for searching by state, industry, annual sales and number of employees. (Only registered users may take advantage of the last two.) The home page also has links to "Featured Companies of the Week," which are selected from a pool of companies that have paid to be a "premier" listing. "Premier" status ensures that their names will appear near the top of search results pages.

## **FreeEdgar:**

<http://www.freeedgar.com/>  
One of the most impressive (and absolutely free!) sites for company information is FreeEdgar. This excellent site offers company profiles and free real-time Securities and Exchange Commission filings. Partes Corporation released FreeEdgar about a year and a half ago, and the company has invest-

ed more than \$2 million recently to expand and upgrade its information technology infrastructure. FreeEdgar is not affiliated with or approved by the SEC. The SEC also releases filings on its own site, Edgar, but they are delayed by 24 to 48 hours. Other sites also have real-time access to Edgar data, but you pay for it. FreeEdgar allows you to search for up to 10 companies at a time. You can pull up either company profiles or SEC filings. By signing up for the "Watchlist" feature (you must register, but it costs nothing), you will be notified via e-mail when your listed companies file a document with the SEC. FreeEdgar also has links to other useful Web sites, such as Wall Street Research Net.

## **Hoover's Online:**

<http://www.hoovers.com/>  
Run by Texas-based Hoover's Inc., this site offers valuable business information, including links to Web sites, a register of thousands of companies on the Web, and a directory of more than 12,000 public and private world-wide companies in an area called "Company Capsules." The excellent database can be searched by company name, ticker symbol and keyword. We like very much the way the data is presented. Key Numbers (sales, income, employees), Key People (officers), and Key Resources (links to more research) were highlighted in a single column. "Financials" and "News" links are easy to find (designed as file folder tabs at the top of the page). Free financial data includes an income statement and balance sheet; the "news" section provides links to news and commentary about the company. Hoover's Online also offers detailed company reports for a subscription fee of \$12.95 per month. This area allows paid subscribers to access, per

month, an unlimited number of detailed company profiles (containing histories, strategies, financials, competitors, and products) from a database of nearly 3,500 companies. Another interesting part of this site was the "List of Lists," a compilation of links to sources that rank companies by various criteria. While it may not be the kind of information you need, it's entertaining fare (don't you want to know the top salaries of media company executives?).

#### **Wall Street Research Net:**

<http://www.wsrn.com/>

Designed as a comprehensive resource for investors, this Web site is a wonderful source of information on companies. Wall Street Research Net has more than 500,000 links to business and financial sites, organized within general categories.

Within the Research category, "Research a Company" allows you to access a company's home page, SEC documents, news, charts, statistical analysis and more. Research we con-

ducted on one company at this site had 56 free links grouped conveniently within 10 categories of information, including company links, news, research and reports, and earnings estimates. The few items that cost money (such as financial spreadsheets) are also included here with a "\$" beside them to indicate there is a fee involved for access. Another research option, "Research the Economy," a subcategory of "Economic Calendar," has links to other useful sites such as federal agencies, publications like "The Economist," and numerous other sources of information. Within the Resources category, "Publications" has a good list of economic and equity publications as well as trade associations; "Journal Search" will give you direct links to company-related articles.

#### **Other Useful Sources:**

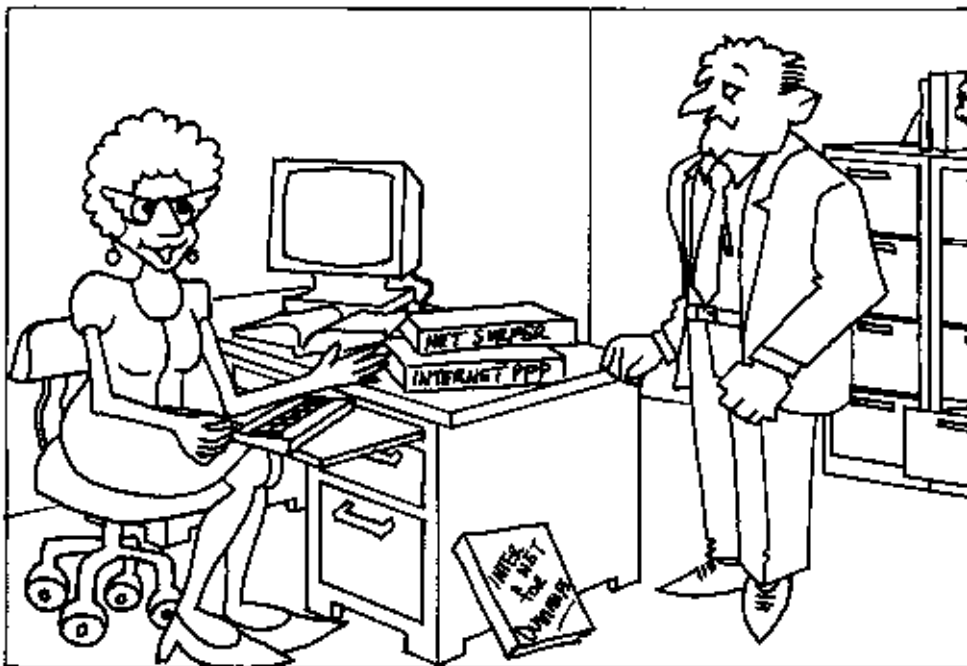
Sometimes you may just want to find out where to find a particular company—by phone, by mail, or on foot. If so, then **BigBook** (<http://www.bigbook.com>) is for

you. A product of American Business Information, Inc., BigBook can provide the name, address, telephone and fax numbers, location, and type of business for 11 million companies. You can search by category (300 of them) or business name, full or partial. BigBook even allows you to use "wild card" characters if you don't know the correct spelling of a company's name. For example, if you know the four-letter company name begins with an "r" and ends with a "d," BigBook may come back from its search with "Reed," "Read," and "Reid." And if you want to personally knock on a company's door, a link provides a detailed map to help you get there.

Interested in finding company Web sites? **NetPartners** (<http://www.netpartners.com/locator/htm>) is an excellent site for finding a company's list of Web sites. You can search by complete or partial company name.

Other good general sources of information are the popular and powerful general search engines such as **Yahoo**, **Lycos**, **Excite**, and **MegaCrawler**. All of these have easy-to-use search procedures, and they can be rather entertaining to navigate, if you have the time.

We hope this list and review of current Web sites helps you save time, gather valuable information on your customers and prospects, and maybe even have a little fun. In any case, as doing business in the Information Age continues to get increasingly complex and demanding, it's nice to know there's help out there in cyberspace—and a lot of it doesn't cost a thing. ♦



"I KNOW THE INTERNET IS THE INFORMATION SUPERHIGHWAY!  
PROBLEM IS, I CAN'T SEEM TO FIND THE ON-RAMP!"

# The Szabo Difference: The Human Touch in a High-Tech World

No one does more than Szabo Associates in using the latest high-tech developments to assess credit risk and help collect past-due accounts. You can see this technical approach in everything from our customized computer system to our Web site.

But the fact remains that ours is a personal business. We know that all of the little things that help us do a more competitive job in the collection business take place in a one-on-one relationship—a personal conversation between two human beings.

In brief, our people are our most important software.

We make certain that we give them everything they need to succeed when they get on the phone in that critical conversation with your past-due client.

That means that our representatives receive the most advanced training available in our field. They learn the most up-to-date information on debtor and creditor rights, of course, but they also learn about dealing with people. They learn persuasion techniques—when to press, when to let up. They learn negotiating skills—the best ways to get what they're after and still leave everyone involved with a smile on their faces.

Our people have an added advantage in that they already know your business. The representative who serves you has been trained and experienced in the same media specialty that you're in. In addition, any of our representatives can walk down our hall and talk to other Szabo representatives who have had experience in the same kind of

payment situation you face.

Before Szabo representatives make a phone call, we make certain they have the most powerful support possible. They can call upon our media resource library, our databases, our updated debtor/creditor laws and rulings, our staff paralegals, and an international network of specialized attorneys.

This means they can focus on your job. They can dig deeply into the late-payment problem, find out where misunderstandings may lie, and find the right buttons to push in persuading a past-due client that it's in his best interests to pay. That's something no computer can do. That's the human touch. ♦



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