

## Taking Advantage of Secondary Research

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As custom marketing researchers, most of us have been conditioned to think of primary research as the solution to our clients' problems. When we design studies, we ask all the typical questions: quantitative, qualitative, or both? Online, phone, in-person, mail? How many interviews, and with whom? What should go into the questionnaire?

But one important question is often neglected: What do we already know?

By taking a step back and thinking about existing information, market researchers can make projects more efficient, cost-effective, robust, and useful. Increasingly, the wealth of secondary information available from public and private sources is being used to add market context, provide competitive intelligence, and even help understand public opinion.

For many clients, the idea of secondary research is appealing, but daunting. It can be time-consuming to review volumes of information and decide which are the most reliable and relevant. Additionally, determining how to present and report data from a variety of sources in a single, concise document can be equally challenging. Many of our clients, stretched for personnel resources in the current economy, are choosing to outsource these tasks to market research companies like ours. In fact, asking a research firm to conduct a secondary search before a primary research study helps provide much-needed context that results in better questionnaires, sampling plans, analysis, and reports. Some of our most successful projects have followed extensive secondary searches; as a result, we are recommending this step more frequently to our clients.

We all know that the Internet is a double-edged sword: it offers convenience and quantity, but not always quality. Below, we offer some tips on navigating the world of secondary research.

**Start simple:** Using Google, Yahoo, or other mainstream search engines, start by searching on your topic. Use different search terms to see what brings you closest to your target. Then, follow the links to discover even more resources. Don't just rely on the first few "hits," which are often sponsored.

**Stick to well-known, mainstream sources:** Government sites (local, state, and Federal) and public databases offer solid, accurate information. University websites often provide reports done by graduate students and professors, sometimes on the same topics you're covering. Industry associations often offer very specific data about their areas of expertise. Company websites and even annual reports can provide key competitive information for clients. We avoid reporting statistics from independent websites, unless the source can be verified.

**Don't forget the media:** Looking at newspaper articles, magazine stories, or even video clips can help understand public perceptions of a topic, or add external context to your research. Doing research for a financial company? Looking at coverage of the economic downturn can help explain the state of mind many consumers are currently in. Conducting a healthcare survey? Understanding media coverage of the recent swine flu epidemic can help frame your findings.

**Use blogs, but beware:** Reading posts on social networking sites (such as Facebook groups) and looking at blogs are very useful ways to obtain an anecdotal read on public (or even expert) opinion. Bloggers and commenters are often very honest, open, and compelling. However, remember that these are individual opinions: "facts" provided may not be facts at all, and opinions expressed do not take the place of actual survey data. The same holds for Wikipedia and other user-generated content: use it for background, but consult the source material before citing.

**Try before you buy:** Many sites offer data or reports for a fee. Before handing over a credit card, make sure you've explored every avenue for obtaining the information for free. A good secondary search can often be conducted without making any purchases.

**Remember the client's internal resources:** Don't forget to speak to clients about the data they may have available internally. Not only do some companies subscribe to syndicated data services, but they may have existing custom research that can help answer some of your study's objectives. Nothing is more frustrating to a client than spending money on a study, only to find that the same topics were covered in another project six months prior. Ask clients to consult their colleagues to see what existing information they have.

**Finally, know the limits:** As exhaustive as a secondary search may be, it is limited by the amount of information available, the ease of accessing that information, and the professional opinion of the researcher. Thus, a secondary search should be treated as qualitative research: it provides context, but not necessarily the whole picture.

**For more information regarding secondary research and/or Zeldis Research Associates, Inc. please look for us online at [www.zeldisresearch.com](http://www.zeldisresearch.com) or call us at 609-737-7223.**