

- Nashville Conference

Mining the Invisible Web for CI:

Mary Ellen Bates - SLA 2004 Conference Presentation*

Summary by Peggy Garvin

**"Look sideways."
"Click everywhere."
"Pick up the phone."
"Give them what Google can't."**

That is some of the advice that SLA members got from info pro Mary Ellen Bates in a session called "Mining the Invisible Web for Competitive Intelligence." The talk was received by a standing- and floor-sitting-room-only crowd in an Opryland ballroom.

"Look sideways" means that when conducting competitive intelligence research we need to search beyond the obvious. Valuable information about a target company probably is not going to come in the form of a neat stack of news articles produced by a razor-sharp precision online search. Instead, think about who--beyond the press and the company itself--cares about the company and its industry sector. Think about what market changes could have an impact on them. Cast a wide net. Questions to ask when fishing for sources and strategies include:

- Who are the competitors?
- Who regulates the industry?



- Who buys their products or services?
- Who is affected by the company or industry?

Some of the answers can be found through web searches, but many of them can not.

While encouraging us to look sideways, Bates does not discount looking at the obvious: the company's own web site. We can't assume that content within a company's web site will be searchable with a general search engine. Go to the site itself and, as Bates said, "click on everything." Print out the site index and use it as a checklist. But do not assume the site map is comprehensive. Keep clicking on everything you see. Use the drop-down menus and check each item. Use the site's own search engine to search for PowerPoint presentations, white papers, and speeches that may be publicly available at the site but not reflected in its links or indexing.

Pick up the phone. The information inside people's brains is so invisible that it is not even on the web. Bates recommends phoning subject specialists at government agencies (the more obscure the topic, the more likely they have time to talk), specialized journalists, university professors, and the experts at think tanks and policy organizations.



Other valuable resources mentioned by Bates include:

- Public records. Many of these are not online. Check BRBpub.com for its portal to public records but keep in mind that this set of links is not comprehensive.
- Dialog File 225, Domain Names. Use it to find both current and

historic ownership information for Internet domain names. You can monitor changes to see if a company is acquiring new domain names in anticipation of a new acquisition or product announcement.

- vault.com. This site is a forum for new hires and recent graduates to vent--or share information--about employers. Consider the bias of the source, but use it to get of picture of the corporate culture as seen by new employees.
- Many more resources were covered. Those not able to attend the talk can learn about these by checking the PowerPoint slides at Bates's web site. See: <http://www.batesinfo.com/speeches.html>.

Bates wrapped up the session with a reminder about the ethical considerations in conducting competitive intelligence research. Don't do anything you wouldn't want to see on the front page of the newspaper. Never lie. So much valuable material is publicly available that--provided you know how to look sideways--you do not have to do anything unethical to get it.

In response to an audience question, Bates advised that we present professionally formatted summaries and analyses of our findings rather than just the raw search results. Connect the dots. Add value. That is something our clients will not get from Google.

** IT Division outgoing chair Ty Webb moderated this June 7th session, which was sponsored by Factiva and Information Today.*



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