

A Clipboard, Cell Phone and a Lap-Top: What Every Organizer Needs
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In today's organizing climate, union activists MUST be computer literate and MUST be on-line. At Building Trades, we make a conscious effort to promote computer literacy. Several affiliates promote that cause as well - at Sheet Metal, much of their organizing and corporate research training curriculum is contained in a self-teaching program on CD-Rom. The Asbestos Workers have equipped their organizers with state-of-the-art laptops and internet access. The Ironworkers and others use a tailor-made organizing software program to facilitate house calling and member tracking.

For over a year now, the Building Trades Advanced Organizer Training Program has contained a two-day module on strategic corporate research, where more than half of the class time is spent in the computer lab doing hands-on work investigating actual union organizing targets on-line. We work on the principle that to answer basic questions about a targeted employers - e.g. "who ARE these people?" - organizers must use computer technology and web-based resources. Otherwise, they are wasting members' dues money by being inefficient.

Some participants in our training have never sat in front of a computer. Locating the on-off switch is step one. A few have asked why the letters on the keyboard are all screwed up ("Hey, what's up with this QWERT shit?"). The computer "newbies" need and get special attention. They often reward us by their rapid learning curve.

We teach basics, like how to use a search engine. Current favorite: www.google.com <<<http://www.google.com>><http://www.google.com>> followed by www.dogpile.com <<<http://www.dogpile.com>><http://www.dogpile.com>>. These are "meta-search" engines meaning they are search tools that use other search tools. Starting with an exercise of having participants plug the name of their target company into these search engines (to see what there is to see), we introduce trainees to the wonderful world of corporate research on the web.

Usually, the target company's web site pops up right away. Increasingly, businesses of interest to union activists will have web sites. We walk participants through these company sites and I always get a kick out of how surprised our trainees are at the level of information companies will reveal about themselves. Typically, a company will describe itself, its

subsidiaries, its structure, its business plan, its major projects and its locations.

Next, we show these activists how to search published news accounts to see what, if anything, has been written about their targets in newspapers, magazines, trade press and business journals. Many, probably most, of these publications are on-line. Nearly all allow you to see their current issue and to search their archives. Unfortunately, more and more are shifting to either pay-per-view or subscription for full services, especially archive search. Even so, this line of research is far more cost-effective than the old-fashioned paper chase. Use media meta-search engines to begin shopping around. Examples:

≤<<http://ajr.newslink.org/news.html>><http://ajr.newslink.org/news.html>>, ≤<<http://www.metagrid.com/>><http://www.metagrid.com/>> and ≤<<http://www.newspapers.com/npcor1.htm>><http://www.newspapers.com/npcor1.htm>>.

Many regulatory agencies, especially federal, have searchable databases that allow activists to develop a "rap sheet" on target companies. You can check out their safety record, environmental compliance, labor law violations and so on. You can use federal, state and increasingly, local government on-line resources to look at industry standards to compare how your target rates. You can compare wage rates, unemployment and benefits for your target versus the industry at the national, state and often county or municipal level. You can use these sources to evaluate the outlook for the industry in which your target operates.

Some convenient portals to government information include:

≤<<http://www.pac-info.com/>><http://www.pac-info.com/>>, ≤<<http://www.library.vanderbilt.edu/romans/fdtf.html>><http://www.library.vanderbilt.edu/romans/fdtf.html>> and ≤<<http://www.fedstats.gov/>><http://www.fedstats.gov/>>.

More government sources are coming on-line and more such sources already on line are expanding and improving. These include state Secretary of State corporate records, local property and tax records, court dockets, court decisions, and local regulatory bodies (e.g. health department inspections). In many instances, these postings tell you a file exists on a target, but you still need to go and look at that file to make the best use of the information.

To read the rest of the article, purchase the CyberUnion Handbook. Look for it at www.cyberunions.net