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Get sales leads online

A new book offers search tips that can heat up your cold calls.

By John J. Curran

(Fortune Small Business) -- When [Black Line Group](#), a Minneapolis accounting firm, wanted to drum up business, it hired telemarketers - lots of them. The effort was a bust, says Black Line marketing chief Scott Schmidt, largely because "so many companies have gate-keepers between the decision-maker and you."

Then Schmidt attended a marketing seminar by Sam Richter that focused on novel ways to use the Web. Shortly thereafter, Black Line shuttered the telemarketing effort, used Richter's tools to find online directories of metal stampers (an industry that can benefit greatly from Black Line's R&D tax credit service), and arranged for a booth at the next metal stampers' convention. Black Line then e-mailed all the companies an invitation to stop by its booth. The campaign provided contacts, which led to follow-up calls and, ultimately, new sales.

Says Schmidt: "The Internet search tips we learned helped put us on a new course."

Sam Richter, former ad salesman and e-business marketer, is on a mission to snuff out dead-end sales calls. In his book, *Take the Cold out of Cold Calling* (available at takethecold.com, \$34.95), and also in his seminars, he teaches Web tactics for finding new prospects, getting past company gatekeepers, and gathering information that can make that crucial first meeting the beginning of a valuable relationship. It's a niche that is not addressed by the vast majority of sales training books and courses, says Michael Benidt of [Golden Compass](#), a Broomfield, Colo., firm that teaches a broader range of Internet search strategies.

With the Web in its second decade, it hardly ranks as news that almost everyone uses search to look up basic information. Richter, however, argues that most small-business owners fail to take advantage of its power. Even business schools are only now scratching the surface, and students, while fast guns on social Web sites, seem babes in the woods when it comes to methodical searching. Dileep Rao, a senior lecturer and venture capitalist at the University of Minnesota's Carlson School of Management, is blunt about the general state of students' web skills: "They are not so good."

Why worry? Because research shows that most basic, unrefined Web searches don't yield results - and

that will cost you money. According to one study by the New York City-based research firm Factiva, employees each year waste \$107 billion of their time in fruitless web searches. And that doesn't include the cost of lost opportunities.

To use Richter's Web tactics, you must first learn to speak smartly to an Internet search engine such as Google ([GOOG](#), [Fortune 500](#)) or Yahoo ([YHOO](#), [Fortune 500](#)). That can be as simple as separating search words with plus and minus signs. For example, as Richter notes in his book, if you wanted to find out about the seafaring Vikings, you'd type "vikings -football" to avoid sites about the N.F.L. team. (Make sure the minus sign touches the word you want excluded and not the main search term.) But the good news is, if you don't know these codes you can go instead to the advanced search feature on the home page of almost any search engine.

"The name intimidates people," says Richter. "But it's a terrific tool." It allows you to launch a refined search without knowing any code.

Among Richter's tactics are tools to help business owners unearth e-mail addresses or the names of midlevel executives (i.e., not the ones in the annual report). Don't know where to start? That's when Richter's favorite "I dunno" icon, the asterisk, becomes invaluable.

Say you're looking to identify decision-makers at Nucor Steel but have neither a directory nor contacts. Using Google, enter "vice president of*" + nucor (position the asterisk as the missing word; quotation marks indicate that you want a phrase treated as a whole). While you won't obtain an orderly roster, you will find a long list of web pages that mention its different vice presidents. A similar trick works if you're looking for e-mail addresses, says Richter. Just type in *@boeing.com to generate a slew of web pages containing Boeing ([BA](#), [Fortune 500](#)) e-mail addresses (position the asterisk as if it were a name, that is, attached to the @ symbol).

And how do you know the correct e-mail suffix, in this case, boeing.com? "Because almost every company e-mail address has the same ending as the company's website," says Richter.

Burrowing deeper

When searching for names of firms within certain industries, there's a smorgasbord of data, much of it free. Scott Schmidt found his metal stampers after Richter tipped him off to the Thomas Register ([thomasnet.com](#)), where you can not only call up company directories for different industries but can also narrow the search by zip code or mileage range. Clicking on the firms listed will produce a brief description plus revenue estimates and the number of employees.

Sometimes a company document can be found online even though it was never intended to be public knowledge. That's because employees or their outside consultants may post files to a website if they are too large to e-mail. You can troll for such pages by asking not for a specific document but for a file type, such as a pdf. Then, if you affix a business name to it, it becomes a company-specific pdf search. Example: Ford + filetype:pdf.

The filetype search can yield junk, but also gems. Richter recalls giving a seminar to executives of a hotel chain a few years back. To drive home the power of filetype searches, he briefly showed his audience one of the hotelier's internal compensation documents.

"They were stunned," he says.

The filetype search can also be used to hunt for Microsoft ([MSFT](#), [Fortune 500](#)) Excel (filetype:xls) and Word (filetype:doc) documents. You can further refine these file searches by adding words such as sales or marketing. Example: GM + filetype:pdf + marketing. Before using any information gleaned in this manner, check first with an attorney to make sure no privacy or intellectual-property laws are being broken.

Some entrepreneurs, such as Cathy Paper, cofounder of [Live Dynamite](#), a motivational consulting company in Minneapolis, have found creative ways to use search to boost sales. After attending a Richter seminar she started tracking one of her client's golf scores online - "a great conversation starter" - and using Google Alerts to follow news and blog mentions about other customers (Google allows you to track up to 1,000 individuals, free).

"It's been great for our business," she says. And if you take the time to learn the ins and outs of advanced search, it could be good for yours too.

-Additional reporting by Adriana Gardella ■

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