



Using public records to investigate a company and its principals

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By Sarah Posner and Esther Kaplan

STEP 1: What Basic Facts Can I Learn About the Company?

Give the company's recent Annual Reports a read, typically available on the company's website. Also look over any interesting company press releases, also typically available on the company's website. If you have access to an academic LexisNexis account, do a Nexis search.

Try more sophisticated Google searches that allow you to find company documents, by searching for the company name and .ppt or .pdf or .doc or using such phrases as "for internal use only."

For publicly traded companies, give their Securities and Exchange Commission reports a read, searchable at <http://www.sec.gov/edgar.shtml>.

If the company is ranked by a business magazine like *Forbes* or *Fortune*, read the company profiles on their sites.

If you want to see what a company was saying a few years back (say AIG before the bonus scandal, or Exxon before the Valdez spill), try the Way Back Machine at www.archive.org/index.php, which will allow you to see versions of the company's website on a date you select.

STEP 2: Who Are the Players?

Is the company publicly traded? You can go to a site like <http://Forbes.com> to check for its ticker symbol.

If publicly traded, go to <http://Forbes.com/peopletracker> or <http://www.implu.com> (both free services) and put in company name to see who the officers and directors are, what their compensation is, and what other company boards they serve on.

If the company isn't publicly traded, you can still typically find out a lot about its management team on the company web site.

If it's a smaller or more secretive company and doesn't have a web site, you might have to go to state corporate filings, typically found at the web site of a State Corporation Commission or Secretary of State. The Georgia Secretary of State has a handy list at <http://sos.georgia.gov/corporations/states.htm> . Some states have useful features where you can click on an officer's name and see the other corporations (both for and non-profit) with which they are affiliated. *Be wary of online services that will do a search for you for a fee.*

STEP 3: How Do the Players Wield Influence?

FEDERAL:

Open Secrets will help you find campaign contributions, information about lobbyists and lobbying, and more. At <http://opensecrets.org> you can:

- check for campaign contributions from individual officers (and, with the aid of a little web searching, contributions from their spouse or children as well);
- check to see if the company has a PAC, who contributed to it and who it supported;
- check to see if the company hired lobbyists, how much they paid them, and what legislation or issues they lobbied on.
- check to see if the lobbying firm has a PAC;
- check to see if the lobbyist or the lobbying firm made contributions to elected officials they lobbied;
- also check the lobbying disclosure forms to see if the company lobbied any federal agencies (see below)

The Center for Public Integrity has another useful database at:

<http://www.publicintegrity.org/projects/entry/290/>

Public Citizen has a database of bundlers and major donors to presidential campaigns at:

<http://whitehouseforsale.org/>

STATE:

For lobbying on the state level, check out this list of sites from the Center for Public Integrity: <http://projects.publicintegrity.org/hiredguns/information.aspx>

For campaign finance disclosure at the state level, go to the National Institute on Money in State Politics web site, <http://www.followthemoney.org/> .

STEP 4: How Influential Are They?

After you've checked the lobbying disclosure reports and campaign contributions from the company, its principals, and its PACs, you'll want to get a sense of whether their efforts yielded any results. For example, if they lobbied for H.R. 111 and made big campaign contributions to Rep. A, did Rep. A vote for H.R. 111? What other connections are there?

The Sunlight Foundation offers a great site for this: <http://maplight.org/map/us> . For bill tracking, use another Sunlight site, <http://www.opencongress.org/> , or the Library of Congress site, <http://thomas.loc.gov/> .

To check for earmarks, the Office of Management and Budget (a government agency) has a database: <http://earmarks.omb.gov/> . Another database was created as a joint project of the Sunlight Foundation and Taxpayers for Common Sense: <http://earmarkwatch.org/>

STEP 5: Does the Company Get Government Money?

The non-profit group OMB Watch has a great new web tool to find federal government grants and contracts, at <http://www.fedspending.org/> or www.usaspending.gov/ .

If the company is reaping huge profits off the taxpayer dime, you might want to check out whether the company has been engaged in any corporate malfeasance. The Project on Government Oversight has a database of government contractors who have been reprimanded or penalized for wrongdoing in connection with their government contracts. You can find it at <http://www.contractormisconduct.org/> . There you can also find links to other government transparency sites and to government sites that likewise enable you to find companies that have been targets of investigations or prosecutions.

STEP 6: Is the Company Engaged in Corporate Malfeasance?

Records of litigation in federal trial and appellate courts, including bankruptcy courts, are extremely useful in this regard and are available at <http://pacer.psc.uscourts.gov/> , a paid service of the United States court system. You are required to register, and a modest fee is required for each search and retrieval.

The United States Tax Court maintains its own online docket system, available at <http://www.ustaxcourt.gov/docket.htm> . This allows you to look at the list of papers filed. You then you need to request the documents themselves from the court, for a fee. Online availability of state court dockets varies widely from state to state.

To check whether the company has health and safety violations, go to <http://www.osha.gov/pls/imis/accidentsearch.html> . To see if it's violated labor laws, go to: http://www.nlr.gov/research/decisions/board_decisions/index.aspx .

STEP 7: Does the Company Have an Affiliated Nonprofit?

Search the company's site, search for press releases, or consult Guidestar at <http://guidestar.org> to discover whether a company has a charitable foundation arm and to find out who that foundation is funding. At Guidestar, you can look at a foundation's tax return (known as a **Form 990**), which they are required to file annually to the federal government. Required state filings typically go to the attorney general's office in the state where the charity is registered; go to <http://www.nasconet.org/agencies> for a listing of state regulatory offices. You can also check whether any corporate principals serve on the boards of other foundations or non-profit organizations, and what those organizations do. And you can check whether the charity has gotten into legal trouble through Pacer <http://pacer.psc.uscourts.gov/>.

STEP 8: Is There Anything You Want To Obtain Through a Freedom of Information Act (Foia) Request?

Ripe targets for FOIAs might be communications between the company and officials at the agency that regulates them or the agency from which they've received a federal contract. You can get some fascinating information this way, but it typically takes a few months.

Items that are FOIA-able: All records of the White House and every federal agency in the executive branch, meaning all papers, reports, letters, e-mails, films, computer tapes, photographs, and sound recordings. At the state level, documents and data created by the state, county, and local governments and their agencies, though state laws vary widely.

Items that are not FOIA-able: Records and documents from Congress (and state legislatures), the federal courts, private corporations, federally funded state agencies, or regional Federal Reserve banks. In addition, there are several federal FOIA exemptions related to classified materials, internal personnel matters, trade secrets, and so on, and each state has its own exemptions. For a complete list of federal exemptions and other FOIA tips, go to: <http://www.rcfp.org/fogg/>. For links to various state Freedom of Information laws, go to: [/www.nfoic.org/state-foi-laws](http://www.nfoic.org/state-foi-laws).

A great way to start on your FOIA request is to use the FOIA generator created by the Reporters Committee for Freedom of the Press at: <http://www.rcfp.org/foialetter/index.php>, which will automatically generate the address for your agency's FOIA office and the legal language that it's useful to include. The site also contains resources on state open records and open meetings laws.