

# A GUIDE TO DESK RESEARCH

Desk Research is what professional researchers use to describe tracking down useful existing pre-published information (also known as secondary research). Many companies need to find out information about their market or competitors but for many reasons cannot justify the expense of conducting large-scale surveys to find the information they need. The aim of this guide is to provide a few directions and tips to help you find the information you are looking for.

## 1 GENERAL TECHNIQUES

Typically when you start looking for information you have a specific question in mind – for instance “What is the size of the market for tulips in the UK?” - but you always have the problem that the information actually might not exist at all. For this reason aim to keep a broad view of the information you are looking for. If you are lucky you might hit the target precisely, but more commonly you will find related information that is useful but not exactly the answer. Sometimes this can be better than the answer to the question you are looking for.

The basic technique is to try to find documents and sources pointing in the direction of the information you want. A list of good starting points promises more than just looking at one particular source. The challenge is where do you start, and how do you know you’ve checked all the possible sources. This is where experience and a bit of imagination can help to think laterally around the subject to find useful information.

For example, for tulips in the UK you might find expenditure on flowers, or on gifts, or

the number of flower shops or the size of tulip farms and the level of tulip imports. There are usually many ways of finding useful estimates for the original question and if all you have is estimates, then try to find at least three to ensure they broadly coincide, and double check they make intuitive sense.

## 2 SOURCES

This isn’t supposed to be a canonical list of sources, perhaps a better description is some sources for sources. You will find more detailed information about using the Internet for research, and conducting primary survey research at [dobney.com](http://dobney.com).

### 2.1 The Internet

With the wide availability of detailed and excellent materials on the Web, the Internet is often the first port of call when looking for information. Depending on what you are specifically looking for the Internet can either be extremely quick and rewarding on the one hand or extremely tedious and frustrating on the other.

The basic principles are similar to normal desk research, in that you mainly want to look for sites that have links to lots of other sources of information, using with your favourite search engine to find these initial sites. The initial sites could be trade associations or interest groups, magazines or just hobbyist links. The challenge is then following up the most appropriate links. This

is described in more detail in another paper on [dobney.com](http://dobney.com).

But don't forget that there are often many alternative ways of finding information and the Internet may well be comparatively slow. We were once using the Web to look for the telephone number of a company, only to give up after an hour. We got the number after a 30 second phone call to directory enquiries.

## 2.2 Libraries

The traditional sources for desk research are libraries. Different libraries have different emphasises – a university or academic library is more likely to have government statistics, whereas a local library will have more information about local businesses for instance. Typically an academic library will have more information and more in detail than a public library (particularly if there is a business school to the academic institution). The problem is always that academic libraries are typically less easy to use and less easy to get access to.

Most business information is held in a separate reference section with directories and catalogues and will typically include Kelly's and Compass and other business listings (see later). As different libraries work in different ways, it is advisable to spend 1-2 hours just browsing to get a feeling for the information the library does and doesn't have, before plunging in to look for specific information. If you know the library, making it work for you will be far easier.

One of the real strengths of libraries is that if you do get very stuck, the librarians are normally only too happy to help. As information professionals, the librarians usually really enjoy trying to find unusual or difficult information. They will also be able

to suggest and order books from other libraries to make the search easier.

A typical approach to finding information say on Tulips in the UK would be to find all the broadly applicable sources then to narrow the search. For instance understanding household expenditure, looking at farm numbers and agricultural output, looking for trade associations for floristry for instance. It would also be worth looking at the specific floristry books to see if they have references that can be followed up. You also might try journals and magazines as often journalists like to include information that they think will be useful to their readers.

As a guideline, typically a good search is likely to last at least 3-4 hours and depending on your personality, some people find it more interesting than others.

## 2.3 Published sources

There are way too many sources to list separately. The following are some favorite sources and most are likely to be found in a large town/city library.

### **General Marketing/Economic Statistics**

#### Marketing Pocket Book

Published annually – brilliant source of basic marketing stats (about £20)

#### Family Expenditure Survey

Government published details of where our money goes

#### Business Monitor

Trade statistics

### Mintel

Up-to-date market research information about different markets

### Keynote reports

Research information about different markets

### Euromonitor

General statistics across a wide range of markets

## **Background information**

Encyclopedia Britannica, Pears Almanac Whitakers, Which?

## **Business specific information**

Kellys, Kompass, Dun and Bradstreet.list companies. Brad also produce an advertising expenditure monitor

Lots of trade directories – many have an industry summary at the beginning

Company reports (Career's libraries also have lots of information about businesses)

## **Local information**

All councils publish minutes from their meetings which can be found in the library. This may well include information such as number of businesses, number of tourists and so on.

## **2.4 Other sources**

If the local library does not have the information you need, you may need to get in contact with other possible sources such as Government departments or trade associations. Most have pre-prepared information packs, or can answer a question directly from their library by post. Normally

you would get in contact by phone to start with.

## **Government departments**

All government departments maintain and produce statistics for their area of responsibility. For instance transport statistics, information about the number of schools, or health statistics. Larger libraries may have this information to hand. Alternatively contacting the departments directly may help you find the information you are looking for. For example, the Department for Trade and Industry (DTI) produces an annual report on the level of IT use in business (Information Society Initiative Report).

Local Councils may also be able to help, but typically have fewer information specialists and move a little more slowly than at the national level.

## **Trade Associations**

In the UK there are trade association for just about every type of work – depending on the question you may find that there are several associations involved. If you were supplying software to schools, you might be involved with the Federation Against Software Theft (FAST), but you also might be a member of the British Educational Suppliers Association (BESA).

Most Trade Associations have a library and sometimes a full-time librarian or researcher. In certain cases, such as the Chartered Institute of Marketing, you may have to be a member to use the library service. In this category we would also include Business Link which provides help to small businesses.

## **Magazines and publications**

For up-to-the-minute information most information will come from trade-press. By monitoring and clipping information you can usually build up a reasonable picture of the market over time. However, you can also phone the magazines to find out if they can help you find information, particularly if you are following up on a story they have written. Again, most magazines have a library and you may be put through to their librarian. The policy depends on the precise magazine.

## **Specialist Research Organisations**

There are a number of specialist market research organisations that collect and publish market research information (for example Mintel, Frost & Sullivan, IDC or Gartner Group in the IT world). However, often this research is expensive and may be too general for the question you wish to ask. It's worth trying to look at some before buying.

Sometimes you can get enough information from these specialist's press releases (often reproduced by trade magazines) to provide a broad market picture, where the detail in their reports is not necessary.

There are also companies that provide library services to members – such as Dialog (was Maid). Many larger advertising and direct marketing bureau have access to much costly data. If you are looking at general consumer purchasing habits, Target Group Index (TGI) from BMRB may be extremely useful. Many advertising houses have subscriptions however, for on-going use you are advised to subscribe yourself.

## **Competitors and suppliers**

The final sources we will give are competitors and suppliers. Often your competitors and suppliers are also conducting market research about the same markets in which you operate and sometime they will share that information with you. Suppliers might be happy to show you the report, whereas competitors might release information in press releases or in conference papers, talks or sales pitches.