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Useful Internet sites

Among the millions of interconnected sites that make up the World Wide Web, there are many that can save business people time and money. You can source information and contacts for any aspect of your work.

This briefing lists various websites that give a glimpse of what the web has to offer. It assumes you are already linked to the Internet (see **Going online**), so you can check out the sites. The web is growing daily. Some sites may close, others will change. This briefing is intended as no more than a starting point for your own explorations. It covers:

- Websites that will help you find new customers and suppliers.
- Sites that allow you to check industry news, patents and other legal issues, and grants and other financial matters.
- Sites that help you make the most of IT generally and the Internet specifically.
- Sites that help you import or export, and sites that make business travel easier.

1 Customers and markets

The Internet speeds up and simplifies the desk research that helps you find out about markets, products and customers.

1.1 It helps you find **market researchers**.

- The Research Buyer's Guide provides a directory of market research organisations in the UK and the Republic of Ireland (www.rbg.org.uk).
- ESOMAR, the World Association of Opinion & Marketing Research Professionals, has a 1500-name worldwide directory which you

can scan for a research company with the specialities you need (www.esomar.org).

- WorldOpinion (www.worldopinion.com) offers you a choice of more than 8,500 organisations in 99 countries, plus news of recent surveys.

1.2 It can put you in touch with suppliers of **promotional merchandise** to publicise your products.

- There are more than 900 UK sources listed at www.promotional-merchandise.org.uk.

1.3 It can even make **sales visits** easier, by generating street maps automatically from your prospects' postcodes (try www.multimap.co.uk).

See **Marketing on the Internet**.

Directors' Briefing

a book in four pages

More than 160 briefings are now available.

If you need further information or help, ask the distributor of this briefing about the services available to you.

2 Suppliers

Sourcing products and services from Britain and further afield has been made faster and easier by the World Wide Web.

2.1 There is a **comprehensive, searchable list** of more than 1.7 million UK businesses, broken down into over 2,500 distinct classifications, at the Yell.com site from Yellow Pages (www.yell.com).

2.2 Another way to locate UK **suppliers** is by using some of the searchable databases that are mainly intended to promote exports.

- The UK Trade & Investment's database of suppliers (www.uktradeinvest.gov.uk) is an impressive source (see **6.2**).

2.3 Major **overseas reference** resources can be accessed instantly.

- For example, the Thomas Global Register Europe (www.tgreurope.com) gives you free access to a searchable directory of over 210,000 industrial suppliers. A sister website, www.thomasnet.com, covers 170,000 US and Canadian manufacturers.
- The Purchasing Research Service (www.purchasingresearchservice.com) provides sector-by-sector supplier listings and news items.

2.4 It is worth investigating the industry-specific **clearing-house sites** that have sprung up.

These specialised sites can provide a forum for deals that would not otherwise happen.

- The Applegate Directory (www.applegate.co.uk) covers suppliers in the electronics, engineering and plastics sectors.
- The Used Equipment Network (www.buyused.com) offers secondhand plant and machinery — from aircraft to x-ray machines — covering more than 75,000 items from more than 10,000 dealers.
- The Virtual Garment Center (www.garment.com) brings together fashion and textile trade suppliers, brokers and buyers from all over the world.
- FreeCargo (www.freecargo.co.uk) is a freight and haulage capacity exchange, bringing together truckers and loads in Britain and across most of Europe.
- QXL (www.qxl.com) is a UK auction site that has found a niche as an outlet for IT manufacturers' end-of-range bargains.

2.5 Many **recruitment agencies** have websites advertising jobs, but only a few allow you to search through a range of candidates.

- For access to a commercial database of over 100,000 CVs, searchable by salary, location, experience and qualifications, visit PeopleBank (www.peoplebank.com).

3 Finance

3.1 You can **credit check** new customers almost instantly with one of the online services.

For a few pounds, they will usually offer a range of checks and credit ratings on both companies and unincorporated businesses.

- Well-known services are D&B (www.dnb.com), Equifax (www.equifax.co.uk) and ICC Juniper (www.iccjuniper.co.uk).

3.2 You can check the new **rateable value** for your business premises at www.voa.gov.uk.

3.3 The web allows you to track down the information you need to apply for **grants**.

- Grantfinder (www.grantfinder.co.uk) is a comprehensive commercial database and research service.

4 Business intelligence

There is valuable information available online on every aspect of your business environment.

4.1 Highly detailed **market reports** are now available online.

- For example, you can buy reports from Euromonitor (www.euromonitor.com), Mintel (www.mintel.com) and Keynote (www.keynote.co.uk).
- D&B Tracker provides a free email service which sends you monthly updates on 50 businesses of your choice (www.do-business.net).

4.2 Keep up with **what's happening** in relevant industry sectors.

- Scan through a note-form archive of recent news and takeovers in 16 industry sectors at www.ukbusinesspark.co.uk.

4.3 Obtain detailed **industry information** from specialised sites run by academic institutions.

- There is a unique UK engineering search engine (www.eevl.ac.uk) which is part of the Edinburgh Engineering Virtual Library.

➡ All web addresses in this briefing are given in the form www.sitename.co.uk. With most browsers, the prefix <http://> will automatically be inserted.

You can search every word of a huge range of engineering websites.

- Edinburgh also hosts the Recent Advances in Manufacturing database (www.eevl.ac.uk/ram/aboutram.html).

4.4 Gather **competitive intelligence**.

- You can find interesting and down-to-earth advice on what information to collect and how to get it, complete with an interactive checklist to help you plan your activities, on an American site at www.fuld.com/Tindex/IntelOrg.html.

4.5 Check disqualified directors instantly at the Companies House website at www.companieshouse.co.uk.

4.6 Check **patents and trademarks**.

- The UK Patent Office covers trademarks and copyright matters and can be searched online at www.patent.gov.uk.

- The European Patent Register has daily updates on European patent applications (www.european-patent-office.org).
- If you have invented something or developed a new process that you want to protect or exploit, investigate Patent Cafe's international pages for advice and useful contacts www.patentcafe.com/directory/directory.asp).

➡ If you know of any sites that are more useful than the ones listed here, please call Naomi Anders at Business Hotline Publications on 020 7924 1137.

4.7 Stay on the right side of **the law**.

- Visit the Business Link website (www.businesslink.gov.uk) for details of legislation and regulations affecting your business.
- Acas (www.acas.org.uk) provides guidance on employment legislation and advice on best practice in HR.
- The main UK trading standards site is at www.tradingstandards.gov.uk.

4.8 Meet industry and consumer **standards**.

- You can check standards that might affect your products at the British Standards Institution site (www.bsi-global.com).

Tracking it down

The best gateway sites can lead you swiftly to the specialist information you need.

- A** There is a useful **government-funded information source** for small businesses.
- The Small Business Service's Business Link site (www.businesslink.gov.uk) provides advice and information targeted at small and medium-sized businesses, as well as links to other useful sites.
- B** There are now much better **UK-centred sources** than ever before.
- Powerful search engines that help you focus by searching only UK websites include www.searchuk.com and www.mirago.co.uk.
- C** Many **international sources** have also beefed up their UK coverage recently.
- The international gateway sites, such as Excite, Yahoo!, Netscape and MSN, are all-embracing, and their .co.uk forms are now targeted on UK businesses.
 - Corporate Information (www.corporateinformation.com) covers the world, but offers superb UK links.

See Finding information on the Internet.

5 Information technology

The Internet is the natural medium for IT issues.

5.1 Countless IT experts use the Internet to **communicate** with each other.

Many will be happy to respond to queries from less knowledgeable users.

- If you have a software or hardware problem, use Google to search for a newsgroup related to the equipment in question (www.google.com/groups).

5.2 The Internet has made it easier to know what to choose when **purchasing IT**.

- Visit the BuyIT Best Practice Network's site at www.buyitnet.org/Best_Practice_Guidelines/ICT/index.jsp.
- Visit www.compinfo.co.uk for useful links to hardware and software suppliers' sites.

5.3 Information and updates about **computer viruses** can be found at www.mcafee.com/anti-virus and www.sophos.co.uk/virusinfo.

6 Import and export

The Internet helps you seek out opportunities and make the most of those you find.

6.1 Research the **trading background**.

- The DTI's UK Trade & Investment site provides a country-by-country index with statistics, trade directories and market research reports and links to useful country-specific websites for exporters (www.uktradeinvest.gov.uk).
- HM Revenue & Customs rules and tariffs

Make the going easy

Travelling on business — in Britain and abroad — can be cheaper and easier if you know the sites that can help you.

A Buy travel tickets online.

- Cheap flights can be found through Travelocity (www.travelocity.com) or Ebookers (www.ebookers.co.uk).
- You can book train tickets at www.thetrainline.com.

B Get there **on time**.

- The interactive timetable on National Rail's site (www.nationalrail.co.uk/planmyjourney) is useful for planning. Put in the time you want to arrive and it tells you when to start.
- The AA's site can work out a route for you, with mileage and timings, and provides up-to-date information on traffic hold-ups (www.theaa.com).
- Find an address in the US from the company's phone number. The reverse look-up site is at www.infospace.com/info/redirs_all.htm?pgtarg=reve.

C Avoid **problems**.

- Time Out (www.timeout.com) and Rough Guides (www.roughguides.com) both offer good city and country guides.
- The travel agent's trade bible, The World Travel Guide, is accessible on the Internet at www.travel-guide.com.
- There is a comprehensive world metro and underground guide at www.subwaynavigator.com.
- If you travel with a laptop and modem, you will need the international phone plugs guide to make your connections (www.kropla.com/phones.htm).
- LaptopTravel (www.laptoptravel.com) has tips on using computers on the move.
- You can check updated estimates of flight arrival times at Heathrow and other UK airports, at www.baa.co.uk.

are spelt out at www.hmrc.gov.uk.

6.2 Identify the **opportunities**.

- The DTI's UK Trade & Investment site (www.uktradeinvest.gov.uk) is aimed at boosting exports. Subscribers receive email alerts whenever British embassies spot export opportunities.
- The International Business Forum lists products for sale and wanted, agents and distributors, joint venture proposals, and other business opportunities, in many countries (www.ibf.com/bo/ibbo.htm).

6.3 Watch out for **events** and exhibitions that can bring you new customers and suppliers.

- UK Trade & Investment carries advance news of trade fairs and overseas trade missions (www.uktradeinvest.gov.uk).

6.4 Overcome **language** barriers.

- Access online dictionaries for over 260 languages at www.yourdictionary.com.

Expert contributors

Thanks to **Martin Walsh** (Business Link York and North Yorkshire, 01904 656769); **Paul Buckthorpe** (Carrera Systems, 01442 827100).

Further help

There are other Directors' Briefing titles that can help you. These briefings are referred to in the text by name.

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