

# An Easy 4-Step System for Getting the Inside Scoop on Your Competition

By Kevin Richardson

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## AN EASY 4-STEP SYSTEM FOR GETTING THE INSIDE SCOOP ON YOUR COMPETITION

By Kevin P. Richardson  
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Kids all across America sat glued to their radios (and later their televisions) in the 1940's and 1950's, listening to the weekly adventure episode of Captain Midnight and his Secret Squadron sponsored by Ovaltine.

The Captain Midnight Decoder Badge was as coveted then by kids as it is today by adult collectors. Why, with your decoder badge and sufficient practice, you could decipher secret messages from the Captain and your friends that no one else could read. Wow zee!

Those same detective skills that were practiced as a youth now prove quite useful as you work to discover ways to outmaneuver your business competition.

Replacing the simple decoder badge is the Internet: a powerful tool in our discovery of competitor information. Using the simple four-step system outlined in this article, you'll use your detective skills to uncover bits and pieces of vital details about your competitors.

## GETTING THE SCOOP

You need business intelligence. It allows us to make more informed decisions for our healthcare organizations. It

gives us an edge.

The Internet places new techniques and tools at our disposal that allow us to sift through a greater amount of information with equally great precision.

## SIFTING THROUGH COMPETITIVE INFORMATION

You should know, however, that this detective work can be time-consuming. It must be done frequently and with regularity. But thankfully, there are many tools to automate the gathering of information that I'll tell you about.

Now let's take a closer look at the four steps, complete with the online techniques for accomplishing them.

### STEP 1 -- MONITOR THE NEWS SOURCES

You may already be clipping newspapers for mentions of your competitors in articles, editorials, profiles, job listings, social announcements, and more.

Now you'll use the Internet to perform extensive searches for information in dozens or hundreds of news sources. What's more, information regularly appears online before it appears in the print version of the publication.

Take note of the tone of the articles about the company. Catalog the emphases in the articles -- fiscal responsibility, community activities, clinical services, patient care, research, fund-raising, administrative announcements. Does it appear that the organization has a well-defined plan for media placements?

Consider these tools for newsgathering:

Who's their PR Counsel? Ask O'Dwyers

Find out the name of your competitor's PR firm (sometimes the same as their advertising firm). Use the free search feature on the O'Dwyers site. Also check the recent news of new client wins, campaign launches, and success statistics that firms may be touting.

See at: <http://www.odwyerpr.com>

### Electric Library

This searchable database of 150 full-text newspapers, 800 full-text magazines, and thousands of transcripts, books and photographs offers a free two-week trial. Searching is free. Full-text retrieval is fee-based, but the date of

publication is given so you may be able to track down the publication text elsewhere or as a periodical in your library. <http://ask.elibrary.com>

## CyberAlert

CyberAlert is an automated Internet monitoring and Web clipping service. It searches a selection of Web publications, other Web sites, message boards, and Usenet news groups to locate mentions about a company. You can specify how often you want the searches to run and report. Fee-based. <http://www.cyberalert.com>

## Press release distribution services

Companies may submit news releases for distribution that never get picked up by the media. Search for them at: Business Wire (<http://www.businesswire.com/>) and PR Newswire (<http://www.prnewswire.com/>)

## STEP 2 -- VISIT THE COMPANY

Visiting the company for information and insight takes several forms. Perhaps you've actually walked through the facilities of a competing hospital or medical practice office. Maybe you've "checked them out" at a trade show or health fair. The best online way of "visiting" the company is perusing their Web site.

What's the look and feel of their Web site? Is it professional? Slick? Amateurish? Patient-oriented? "Me"-oriented? Is it a marketing vehicle? A patient education tool? Simply a brochure? Does it change frequently? Do they have tools or features that improve customer service and patient care? Is it valuable for current and prospective patients?

Here are a few techniques, tactics, and suggested tools:

### Cloak your IP address

No sense tipping off your competitors that someone from your organization is visiting their Web site. You can hide your real identity so your company's domain name doesn't show up on their server logs by using a tool such as Anonymizer. Go to the [anonymizer.com](http://www.anonymizer.com) Web site and type in the Web address that you want to visit. Voila! You're incognito. <http://www.anonymizer.com>

### Things to do at their Web site

While you're surfing on a competitor's site, there are

several additional things to watch out for. For example, do they have publications for employees, medical staff, or investors available? If so, take a look. Look for the press release archives on the site. See what's important to the organization.

Look for executive profiles. See the type of executives they recently hired. What are their strengths? Be sure to subscribe to any and all e-mail newsletters -- using your free e-mail address, of course (such as Yahoo or HotMail).

Search for specific file types

Using WebCopier, you can crawl a competitor's Web site looking just for specific types of files, such as documents. These can be PowerPoint presentations, Adobe PDF documents, Microsoft Word Documents, Excel spreadsheets and more.

You may find marketing materials, brochures, and a wealth of other information that could help you get a picture of your competitor's overall strategy and positioning. Get WebCopier at Download.com.

<http://download.cnet.com>

What did their site look like?

Ever wonder what your competitor's site used to look like? Has their strategy changed over time? Maybe some materials used to be on their Web site and have now been removed. Want to take a look at them? Well you can, thanks to The Internet Archive -- also known as "The WayBack Machine."

The Wayback Machine makes it possible to actually surf pages stored in the Internet Archive's web archive. Visitors to the Wayback Machine can type in an URL, select a date, and then Begin surfing on an archived version of the web.

<http://www.archive.org>

What other domains have they registered?

Discovering the various domain names that your competitor has registered can be eye opening. Maybe they've registered a domain name on speculation for some future project or service launch. It might also tell you where they'll soon be putting their strategic emphasis.

In the old days of the Internet -- a couple of years ago -- this was a lot easier. But it can still be done if you're lucky. The primary registrar of domain names used to be Network Solutions (NetSol).

Go to their site and use the WHOIS function, which searches

the domain registration database. Type in the organization name and select "search WHOIS by organization".

Let me share a secret with you: If you want to register a name on speculation and keep it a secret -- then don't use NetSol!  
<http://www.netsol.com>

### STEP 3 -- TRACK OFFICIAL/LEGAL NOTICES

Monitoring news sources will catch certain types of official and legal notices, such as the publication of Determination of Need announcements, zoning regulation requests, building permit requests, and other local news. But for trademark registration applications, SEC filings, and Fair Disclosure filings, you'll often need to look elsewhere.

#### Track SEC filings

Use FreeEDGAR or EDGAR online to search for business, financial and competitive information derived from U.S. Securities and Exchange Commission data. If your competition is publicly traded, this is a great source of information. You can find SEC filings for individual companies, summary information, background on executives and directors, and links to analysis. Search is free, some information is available for free, other information is fee-based.

<http://www.edgar-online.com>

<http://www.freeedgar.com>

#### Search for trademarks

Similar to looking for domain names registered for future use or speculation, searching for pending trademark registrations is also valuable. If your competitor has registered or started the process of trademark registration, you'll be able to find out at the United States Patent and Trademark Office Web site. The search engine is easy to use once you locate it -- so the direct link to the trademark search page is: <http://tess.uspto.gov>

See the main site at: <http://www.uspto.gov>

### STEP 4 -- LISTEN TO THE GRAPEVINE

Gathering anecdotal information helps to create a more complete picture of a competitor's situation and strategic emphasis. Online there are several ways to discover and observe the current state of affairs, as well as gain a perspective on the past.

Try some of these:

Visit the competitor's online forums

The competitor's Web site may host online discussion forums for the benefit of health consumers. Since a forum is usually designed as sort of an online support group for patients with common interests, it's not unusual to read quite candid comments about an organization. As another example, you might also read one patient's informal reportage of some news happening at the hospital. All of this can be a useful addition to your competitive information gathering.

Search the Usenet postings

On a more global scale, you are probably familiar with Usenet, the Internet's extensive system of discussion groups. The content of the messages on these hundreds of groups can be searched at Google.com (formerly located at DejaNews.)

Want to kick it up a notch? Google also hosts the complete 20-year Usenet Archive with over 700 million messages. All of them can be searched from the same interface. You can search for messages that were posted by your competitor's employees. You can also search for messages that mention that company's name, products, services, and anything else you can think of. It's worth a look.

<http://groups.google.com>

Think like a job seeker

Click over to your favorite job search site to search for job postings by your competitor. A quick search for your competitor's name at Monster could locate a handful of postings to staff a new function or service area.

<http://www.careerbuilder.com>

<http://www.monsterboard.com>

<http://www.headhunter.net>

Think like a hirer

Now search the same job banks as an employer. Look for people who work for your competitors. Uncovering a large number of resumes from current employees could signal a layoff is imminent, or that an area is being downsized.

**YOUR WEEKLY ASSIGNMENT... FROM CAPTAIN MIDNIGHT**

Rather than simply reading about all of these techniques, why don't you set aside 30 minutes or so and use what you've just learned. I guarantee you'll find something of interest.

And, oh yes, let's not forget... now that you've seen how to ferret out competitor information, aren't you wondering what others might discover about your company? You should be.

Make it a point to try some of these techniques and see what your Web site and online activities tell your competitors. Once you know what to look for, you can also better manage what is revealed about your company.

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Kevin Richardson is a healthcare marketing consultant, executive coach, and writer who provides fresh perspectives and expertise about online healthcare marketing. Subscribe to his "MedRocket Ezine" newsletter and discover how to profitably attract and serve healthcare consumers online. Subscribe free: <http://www.medrocket.com>

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