

## Vetting Donors

Phil Kuntz  
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202-862-9283

Here are some tips and sources for figuring out who donors are--and whether you should care--when all you have is a name and possibly an address and/or a place of business. Obviously, a lot of this stuff also works for people you've already identified who you're trying to profile or otherwise figure out.

1. First, of course, go to your newspaper's clip files or database, especially if the person is local. Check both the person and the place of business.

2. Next, use Nexus or some other newspaper data base, such as Dow Jones News Retrieval (DJNR), to search for both the person and the place of business. (Some public libraries have such services available for free.) Framing your search is crucial here, because you want to make sure you get as many potential "hits" as possible, taking into account misspellings, nicknames and alternative spellings. So if you're trying to figure out who Philip A. Berger is, you would search for any time the word Phil, Phill, Philip or Phillip appears within two words of either Burger or Berger. In DJNR, for example, your search would look something like this: (Phil or Phill or Philip or Phillip) adj2 (Berger or Burger); "adj2" means adjacent within two words.

3. You also should search the Internet; if you don't have access, you should first demand it from your employer and in the meantime, go to a public library or some bar or coffeehouse that has it available. Use a couple of different search engines to make sure you cover all bases. Some search engines, like AltaVista, have advanced search forms that allow you to be as specific or as broad as you like. Again, framing your search is key. Also, there are a number of people-searching engines now, including WhoWhere, that let you search nationwide for phone numbers, e-mail addresses and even maps and directions for getting to your subject's home.

4. Libraries may seem old-fashioned, but they are wonderful resources for this sort of thing and often answer phone queries. Most major libraries have biography sections that include a wonderful, little-known index called BioBase of everybody who has ever been in any Who's Who type publication, of which there are hundreds. The great thing about this is that people who are otherwise unimportant sometimes put themselves into these books; how stupid of them.

Many libraries also have corporate cross-reference material that allow you to find out on which boards your subject serves. Some also have property records and address cross-reference books on hand. Another useful library tool: clip files from defunct newspapers; the Washington Star's, for example, are at the downtown DC library. Annual indexes from larger newspapers, such as The New York Times, are also good for figuring out who's who. If you're in Washington, the Library of Congress has a huge collection of newspapers and newspaper indexes.

6. While you're at the local library, pick up the Martindale-Hubbell Law Directory, an index of all the lawyers in the country by state. Donors are frequently lawyers, and this book can tell you interesting things about your subject's firm and possibly even provide a resume.

7. Check out Washington Representatives, a comprehensive phone book of lobbyists and other mouthpieces in the nation's capital that relies on lobbyist registration reports from Congress, Foreign Agent Registration Act filings from the Justice Department and numerous other sources. If you don't have one, and plan to write even occasionally about campaign finance or federal public policy, you should get a copy, which costs about \$55. Call Columbia Books Inc. in Washington at 888-265-0600. You can check here for both your person's name and the name of his/her company (to see if it has a lobbyist).

8. You can also check directly with the House or Senate public records offices (202-225-1300 or 202-224-0762) or the Justice Department's FARA Office (202-514-1216) to see if a person or their business has ever registered; if they have, those documents include a plethora of useful tidbits. You might want to check the state or local lobbyist registration office where your subject lives or does business, too. The Federal Election Commission puts out a wonderful phone book of all state lobbyist registration and campaign finance offices in the country. It's called the Combined Federal/State Disclosure Directory. Call 202-219-4140 and ask them to send you a copy.

9. Speaking of the FEC, you should always check who else your subject and his/her company have helped finance. The FEC has a fairly reasonably priced computer dial-up service; it's great once you get the hang of its cumbersome ways. Or you can visit the FEC's public records office yourself. You can also call the above number for computer-search requests, but that takes time. Another source of this sort of information is the National Center for Responsive Politics (202-857-0044), which does campaign finance research for journalists on request; they're very helpful but swamped, so be specific and patient. The center also has a great webpage with lots of searchable donor information on it ([www.crp.org](http://www.crp.org)).

10. While your plumbing sources in the Capitol, you might want to check with a reference tool called the Congressional Information Service (CIS), which is available in the Senate Library and some other libraries as well. It indexes every hearing and congressional publication going back to the beginning of time. You'd be amazed at how many people (especially donors) have testified before Congress at one time or another. The Senate Library, which also has access to every congressional publication and hearing record since the founding of the republic, is there to serve members first, but they'll help the press, too, if you're polite and patient (202-224-3121; ask for the Senate Library). Another CIS source is the Congressional Quarterly research service, which answers basic questions for subscribers, so if your paper subscribes you can give them a call (202-887-8500) and ask them to do a CIS search for you.

11. Speaking of Congress, you should also visit THOMAS, the Library of Congress's legislative information Internet service ([thomas.loc.gov](http://thomas.loc.gov)). Not everything is on-line yet, and some of the stuff that is isn't searchable. But you can and should search the Congressional Record for the past several Congresses to see if your subject's name has been mentioned on the floor or inserted into the record by some beholden public servant.

12. To the extent possible, especially for hometown donors, you should also check for civil suits and criminal charges at the local court house. In many places, this is all very computerized and sometimes possible to check out from your personal computer. Obviously, if somebody has a criminal case or a civil suit, dive in: Even if the matter has nothing to do with what you're looking for, court documents are chock full of useful biographical and financial

information about individuals, especially divorce records. For out-of-towners, you can call the county, state and/or federal court clerk's civil and criminal offices where they live and ask if there have been any cases involving them either as plaintiffs or defendants. Many big cities have private legal researchers who can do additional spadework, including document copying, for a fee; call the clerk's office for suggestions.

11. Don't forget to ask other campaign finance players, politicians and lobbyists in the community. Nobody likes to talk about lobbyists and donors more than other lobbyists and donors; they're always so relieved you're not calling about them. Rival campaigns and parties are also good sources for basic information, because their opposition researchers are looking for the same thing and may be a couple of steps ahead of you.

9. When all else fails, the nuclear weapon of all people-finding devices is AutoTrak, a huge and very expensive dial-up database that culls information from just about every publicly available record in the country. From there, you can search phone records, corporate filings, property records, motor vehicle records, criminal histories, plane and boat ownership records and any number of other sources.

Once you've learned how to use this, you can find anybody in the country who isn't named John Smith, and you could find him, too, if you knew his wife's name, any previous address or where he was born. This thing will give you every basic fact there is to know about a person: date of birth; social security number, including the state where it was issued; past and current addresses; some business addresses; phone numbers, sometimes unlisted ones; neighbors past and present with phone numbers; property ownership; and corporate connections. If this sounds scary, that's because it is. But think about it this way: Essentially AutoTrak is selling to everybody what only the government had access to before.

As you might expect, AutoTrak usually has a booth at IRE conventions. They'll do some sample runs for you. Check it out. They can be reached at 800-279-7710.