



Loss Control TIPS

Technical Information Paper Series

Innovative Safety and Health SolutionsSM

Evaluating Information From the Internet

We've all heard of the Internet and of the World Wide Web, and of the vast amounts of information available through these and other online services. A growing number business people are using online services to find information to support their work in technical research, customer service, market research, and other areas. Our business decisions are based on information. To make *effective* decisions, we must use information that is pertinent, reliable, accurate, current, authoritative, and credible.

Why Evaluate Information?

Traditionally, the information most readily available to us came from reliable, familiar sources: scholarly or scientific publications, libraries, or government agencies. Nowadays, with the advent of the Internet and other online services, the *amount* of information readily available to the general public has increased exponentially. But has reliability kept pace with growth?

One of the wonderful aspects of online information is the ease with which it can be created and disseminated. Anyone can create a "home page" on the World Wide Web or disseminate information, graphics, statistics, and more through the Internet. It's cheaper, faster, and much easier than traditional print publishing. However, the traditional publishing process offers a major advantage over most online "publishing": *quality control*. Information on the Internet is notoriously uneven in depth, stability, and reliability. Much of the information on the Internet or in other online sources has not been *filtered*.

The Importance of Filtered Information

The best, most reliable information we use has been *filtered*; that is, it has been created, identified, selected, reviewed, evaluated, authenticated, and/or organized by reliable individuals, organizations, or institutions. Traditional filtering agencies include:

- *Authoritative creators or sources*: government agencies, established and well-known research facilities, some associations (this varies depending on your perspective), etc.
- *Authoritative editors, reviewers, or revisers*: respected publishers, subject experts, the traditional scholarly peer-review process, etc.
- *Authoritative evaluators*: subject experts like reliable book reviewers or critics, or librarians with subject specialties or with expertise in evaluating all kinds of information

Traditionally, libraries have been—and still are—among the best sources of reliable information. As more information becomes more easily accessible, and as individuals and organizations do more of their own online research on the Internet and other "immediate" sources, the task of filtering and evaluating information falls to the individual. Also, many online users mistakenly believe that information from a computer is, by definition, as good as—or even better than—information from traditional print sources.



How to Evaluate Information on the Internet

Always evaluate the quality of information you use, regardless of its medium or source. In general, traditional concepts and methods for evaluating print information sources can be applied to Internet sources. Here are some general guidelines and questions to consider in evaluating information from the Internet. (This article does not evaluate “search engines,” the software programs used for locating information in online systems. Some search engines do contain evaluative functions and may provide some assistance; however, in the final balance, it’s up to you to know what you’ve found and evaluate its reliability, accuracy, and objectivity.)

Evaluate the Creators

- Who created the site? Is the identity readily apparent?
- Does the site contain names, credentials, and contact information for the creator(s)?
- What is the reputation of the creator? Is the creator considered authoritative?
- Is it a government agency? Reputable publisher, association, or trade group? Individual?
- What is the *perspective* of the site or information? What is the social, political, or economic bias or agenda of the creator? (The bias or agenda may influence content, accessibility, accuracy, and even the selection of linked sites.)
- What is the *purpose* of the site or information? (assess the intended audience, scope, coverage, etc.; these are clues)

Evaluate the Content

- What is the purpose of the site? Entertainment? Business/commerce? Scientific research? Reference? It’s essential that you make this assessment and keep the results in mind as you review and use the information you find.
- What is the intended audience?
- Does the site have real, useful information? Does it have depth and breadth?
- Does the site have actual information, or just links to other sources? Is it primarily advertising? Are they trying to sell you something? Is the creator’s intent clear, and the description accurate?
- Is the information suitable for your level of understanding or expertise?
- Is the information presented objectively? Is it fact, or is it opinion? If it is opinion, whose is it? Is this person or entity truly expert, authoritative, and unbiased?
- Has this site been reviewed, evaluated, or edited? By whom? With what result?
- Are the grammar, spelling, usage, etc., correct? (Sloppy writing or spelling could indicate that there is little or no quality control or other editorial review.)
- If there is a print equivalent, is the online version actually an equivalent? Don’t be misled into thinking that the online version is automatically better simply because it’s online! It may be easier to use, but may not be as complete, or surprisingly, as current, as the print version. Conversely, an online version may have useful features, content, or graphics not in the print version, such as online statistical calculations, more frequent updates, links to related sites, etc.)
- Compare the information in the site to other sources of similar information.
- Check for other publications (print or online) by the same author or organization.
- Does the site include bibliographies, lists of resources, or links to other sites?
- Is this original information, or compilations of information from other sources?
- Does this site add to the knowledge of the subject? Does it update, contribute, authenticate, or substantiate, existing information? Is it rich? Is it unique?
- Is there adequate documentation for the information in the site?
- How stable is this information? Can you rely on it? Will it be there next week?

- Does the site include materials which are protected by copyright? (Be sure to comply with federal copyright laws when using information that is protected by copyright.)
- Does the site include others' copyrighted works? With or without credits and permission? (Unauthorized use of copyrighted materials may indicate a disreputable or dishonest creator.)

Evaluate the Currency of the Site

- When was the site created?
- How often is it updated? When was the last update? Can you tell?
- Are new features highlighted or otherwise indicated? Can you tell what changes have been made?
- Should this site be updated regularly? (some sites, like literary collections, don't need frequent updating)
- Is the site maintained? Are links to other sites kept current?

Evaluate the Style of the Site

- Is the site easy to use? Is it easy to read, navigate, find what you need?
- Is the site well-organized? Is the organization readily apparent? Is the organization appropriate to the subject matter, audience, etc.?
- Do the opening pages have sufficient information about the site? (purpose, scope, intended audience, creators, updating, construction status, copyright status, internal organization, etc.)
- Does the site have a table of contents or site map?
- Does the site have its own subject index or other search tool? (This is especially important in sites with large amounts of information.) Is it easy to use and understand?
- Does the site offer links to other sites? (If it does, that's good, although it's not essential. Some sites with little breadth or depth may try to boost their credibility by linking themselves to the best or most authoritative sites. If it does not offer links to related sites, think carefully; no one site should position itself as the sole source of information on a topic.)
- Are links to other sites "hot" (operable)? Are "cold" links removed?
- If the site is "under construction," are there signs to indicate this? Any indication of when construction will be completed, or of what's being developed?
- Is the site attractive? Is the design appropriate for the subject matter? Does the design enhance the user's ability find and use information?
- Is the site distinctive in appearance, style, content, etc.?
- Is the information presented clearly?
- Do the graphics enhance and complement the information, and make it easier to find and use information? Or do they detract and distract from it?
- Is the site *too* rich in graphics, video, or sound? (too much can cause slow response)
- Does the site provide a text-only option for users who don't want, or can't use, the graphics?

Evaluate the Accessibility of the Site

- Does the online site charge a fee? Don't be put off by fee-based services; just think of them as subscriptions. It's reasonable for information companies to charge for their products.
- If a fee is charged, are you getting your money's worth? Is there good value?
- Do other reputable Internet sites provide links to this one? (This indicates that other people—perhaps subject experts—may have reviewed and evaluated this site prior to selecting it.)
- Is this site the *best* way to access and use this information? (There may be a print equivalent or other online source that is better, cheaper, or easier to use.)

Putting it All Together

Yes, the Internet is a wonderful tool for finding information. But remember, it's just that—a *tool*, and nothing more. It's still up to you to evaluate and make sense of the information you identify and retrieve. In particular, when you are using information from the Internet or other external sources to support your business decisions, your success—and, therefore, the success of your organization or your company—will be influenced by the quality and reliability of the information you use.

References

1. Brandt, D. Scott. "Evaluating Information on the Internet." *Computers in Libraries*, May 1996, pp. 44-46.
2. D'Angelo, John, and Sherry K. Little. "Successful Web Pages: What Are They and Do They Exist?" *Information Technology and Libraries*, June 1998, 71-81.
3. *Evaluating Information: A Basic Checklist*. American Library Association, c1994.
4. "Gems and Junk: Tips for Evaluating Information Retrieved from the Network," pp. 87-88 in *Teaching Electronic Information Literacy*, edited by Donald A. Barclay. New York: Neal Schuman, c1995.
5. Hahn, Susan E. "Internet: Let the User Beware." *Reference Services Review*, Summer 1997, pp. 7-13.
6. Halvorson, T. R. "Searcher Responsibility for Quality in the Web World." *Searcher: The Magazine for Database Professionals*, October 1998, pp. 12-20.
7. "Is This Site Reliable?" *FDA Consumer*, June 1996, p. 23 (also at <http://www.fda.gov>)
8. Kennedy, Shirley Duglin. "Finding the Gems Among the Garbage." *Information Today*, January 1997, pp. 43-44.
9. King, Angelynn. "Caveat Surfer: End-User Research on the Web." *Journal of Interlibrary Loan, Document Delivery & Information Supply*, vol. 8, no. 1, 1997, pp. 53-60.
10. Kirshenber, Seth. "Info in the Internet: User Beware!" *Training*, November 1998, pp. 83-84.
11. Notess, Greg R. "Tips for Evaluating Web Databases." *Database*, April/May 1998, 69-72.
12. Quint, Barbara. "Critiquing the Quality of Your Search Results: It's Not What You Know, It's..." *Online User* vol. 3, no. 1, January/February 1997, pp. 23-26.
13. Retting, James. "Beyond 'Cool': Analog Models for Reviewing Digital Sources." *Online* vol. 20, no. 5, September/October, 1996, pp. 52-64.
14. Tillman, Hope N. "Evaluating Quality on the Net." (<http://www.infotoday.com/cil.html>)

For more information, contact your local Hartford agent or your Hartford Loss Control Consultant. Visit The Hartford's Loss Control web site at <http://www.thehartford.com/corporate/losscontrol/>

This document is provided for information purposes only. It is not intended to be a substitute for individual legal counsel or advice on issues discussed within. Readers seeking resolution of specific legal issues or business concerns related to the captioned topic should consult their attorneys and/or insurance representatives.