

8-1-2004

The Internet as a Tool for Long-Term Program Evaluation: Locating "Lost" Individuals

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Recommended Citation

Bryant, B. K., & Raskauskas, J. L. (2004). The Internet as a Tool for Long-Term Program Evaluation: Locating "Lost" Individuals. *The Journal of Extension*, 42(4), Article 27. <https://tigerprints.clemson.edu/joe/vol42/iss4/27>

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August 2004 // Volume 42 // Number 4 // Tools of the Trade // 4TOT4



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The Internet as a Tool for Long-Term Program Evaluation: Locating "Lost" Individuals

Abstract

Long-term evaluation of Extension programs, including 4-H programs, can be elusive because of the difficulty of locating former participants. The Internet is a tool that makes feasible this task of locating former participants. Guidelines for original record keeping are provided to further later success in locating individuals. Web sites are identified that were used in one completely successful search for 168 adults who had participated in a study as children roughly 25 years earlier. Strategies for using the Web sites are included because the process of using the Internet is not always straightforward.

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The Need for Long-Term Program Evaluation

Where are they now? That is a question when one considers long-term, follow-up evaluation of Extension programs (e.g., 4-H programs). The Internet can be a useful tool in this regard. Cooperative Extension has always aimed at making enduring changes to the benefit of our nation's citizenry. Long-term follow-up studies are an uncommon method of program evaluation. Locating former program participants, especially youth participants later in their adult lives, can be a challenge. The Internet is a tool to find former youth and adults long after their participation in Extension programs.

The Benefit of Comprehensive Record Keeping

Good record keeping at the time of program participation is key to locating participants later on. A full record would include each participant's full name, including middle name, birth date, and comparable information for other family members, when reasonable. Locating female participants is particularly challenging due to name changes at time of marriage. Having the names of other family members, especially male relatives, can be helpful in this regard. Finally, to make follow-up of participants complete, it is important to document deaths because the dead are "missing data" of a particular kind.

Useful Web sites for Locating People

(All web sites reported here were retrievable as of August 29, 2004.)

Publicrecordfinder.com--www.publicrecordfinder.com/vitalrecrds.html

This site provides links to birth, marriage, and death records organized by state and county. Unfortunately, not all states and counties are represented at this time.

Anywho.com--www.anyonewho.com

This site can be used identify city of residence from entering an individual's name. This is useful when tracking someone to a new location.

The Ultimate White Pages--www.theultimates.com/white (Does Reverse Searches)

This site allows one to search the phone books of several search engines simultaneously.

Bigfoot.com--www.bigfoot.com

This Web site provides phone listings, addresses, and e-mail addresses and is a good source for doing whole country searches by name.

InfoUSA--www.infousa.com (Reverse Searches Possible)

In many cases, this Web site provides listings for all household members who receive marketing materials, so sometimes one can find wife information when the phone book listing is in the husband's name.

Intelius--www.intelius.com

This site provides birth date, current residence, past residence, age, full name, and phone number information. Because the site is based on many different sources of public information, it is one of the most up-to-date and accurate of the public record databases. It also provides an "as of" date to let you know how current their information is.

US Search--www.ussearch.com

Free searches include name, approximate age, and current/past city and state of residence. Assistance by phone is also available.

Ancestry.com--www.ancestry.com

This site is designed for genealogy research.

SS Death Index--www.daddezio.com/favorites/ssdi-death-index.html

This site is a national death index that allows one to search by name or date of birth. It provides state of birth/death, date of birth/death, and maiden name when applicable.

USGen Web Project--www.usgenweb.com

In addition to identifying the dead, the published obituaries on this site often provide information for locating relatives and obtaining the married names of women.

OnlineDetective--www.onlinedetective.com

Offers software and consultation on doing searches. Only PC users can benefit from this site. The option of personal consultation is an unusual benefit.

Google--www.google.com

Mamma--www.mamma.com

Because these are highly powerful general Internet search engines and filter possibilities do not exist, searches using these engines often generate long lists of site possibilities. Because it is very time consuming to sort through a long list of sites, these search engines are best for finding people in public or high-profile jobs.

Cautionary Notes

Although providing a list of Web sites makes the process of locating individuals appear simple, this is not entirely true. Several cautionary notes are worth mentioning.

1. Information may be stored by the initial of the first name and not the full first name. Try both methods of entering the "first name," even when first name is requested. Different names can appear using the two methods.
2. Locating an individual can be a multi-step process. For example, step one may be to find the state or city, and then, once the city of residence is known, the second step is to locate a specific address.
3. It will be important to double check findings to be confident that one has the correct individual. It may be surprising how many people share a name. Birth date or age is an excellent source of confirmatory information because age is often one of the bits of data by which individuals are identified.

Conclusion: Case Study of Locating Previous Participants

By using the sites noted above, we spent roughly 2 hours per individual to locate 168 adults in their mid thirties whom we have not seen for roughly 20-25 years. The only fee service we used was www.onlinedetective.com. Crucial to locating participants later on was original record keeping. We had obtained full names and birthdates of the 168 children first studied. In addition, we had the same information on their parents and one older sibling. All former participants were found, albeit the deaths of several were documented.

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