SEARCHER

Alacra

Cheerful Willingness, Readiness, or Promptness???

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When I read that Data Downlink changed its name to Alacra, I found myself a bit skeptical. I would never like to admit that I am resistant to change, but I've been so content with Data Downlink's .xls service over the past few years that I worried that a "new and improved" name would not bring "new and improved" changes in the product. But I can put my worries aside, because Alacra not only continues to provide its wide variety of business-related databases, but also a powerful new interface that keeps both the information professional and casual researcher in mind.

As Amelia Kassel covered in an earlier issue of *Searcher* ["Here They Come! Database Producers on the Web," vol. 5, no. 7, July/August 1997, pp. 26+], Alacra licenses over 80 databases containing data on:

- Public and private companies, including detailed financials
- Trade and news publications
- Market research and investment bank reports
- Mergers and acquisitions
- Historical and current betas and earnings estimates
  • Shareholding and bondholding
- Executive compensation
- Mutual fund performance
- Global economies

One reason why I've become a fan of the service is because it was developed for the Internet, making it not only a dependable system but also a breeze to use technically. I appreciate the broad range of databases available, the ability to download much of the information directly into spreadsheets (hence the former name, .xls), and finally — it has one of the best customer support teams around.

One Product — One Database

OK, so why the name Alacra? Coined from the word alacrity, which means cheerful willingness, readiness, or promptness, Alacra aims to add value by packaging its databases and presenting information in terms of research subject or concept. The original .xls home page presented a list of 80 databases from which the researcher could begin a search. The new Alacra home page provides a search feature that allows researchers to search across the entire 80+ databases simultaneously.

However, the icing on the new Alacra cake that has won my approval is the integration of Portal B — the company's database of the best business-related Web sites culled from the bookmark files of information professionals in the field as well as Alacra's staff. In other words, a search across the Alacra system of 80+ databases will also retrieve relevant Web sites. These hand-selected, content-rich sites, now called "The Business Web," come from the Web sites of business and law schools, governments and associations, and commercial enterprises. Each site is then summarized and indexed (see Figure 1).

I should point out that Alacra spiders all the individual Internet pages included in the Portal B database, as well as its .pdf files, thereby uncovering many useful pages that might otherwise have been inaccessible from the invisible Web. Gone are the days of re-keying data from tables found on these Web sites. Alacra reformats the data so that researchers can download it directly into a spreadsheet.

Ahhhh … Indexing!

Don't let the "search the business Web" phrase near the initial search box overwhelm you or raise your skepticism. Alacra does a lot of indexing and it presents search results not in one long list, but

divided by categories. Every single Web site in Alacra's database is indexed, creating filters through which users can perform keyword searches. Index tags encompass 95 industries, 204 countries, 11 geographic regions, 12 organization types, five languages, and 18 business topics.

Alacra also maintains an authority file for close to 30,000 global companies and cross-references each to the equivalent company identifier in each source (premium) database on the service. This ensures that a search for a particular company across the entire Alacra system will retrieve relevant hits from every database containing a record on that company. Similarly, Alacra indexes each record by geography and industry using the keywords from each company's business description. This in-house indexing is in addition to the indexing provided by each of the licensed databases contained in the system, indexing which remains searchable using the advanced search feature or when searching in a particular database.

Changing My Ways

Personally, I think the new Alacra will best help the average researcher unlikely to know which database is the most appropriate to use. The researcher only needs to type in the subject of their search. The system searches all the databases at once, including Alacra's Business Web, and brings back a list of results. In this way, researchers may discover new information and sources they may not have known about and don't have to decide which database is the best from the start.

Those of use who prefer to start our searches directly with a particular database, however, have to click through a few screens before reaching the list of databases. I'm not exactly fond of this new change, because there are times when it makes sense to head directly for a specific database, like Mergerstat for a merger and acquisition search. However, Alacra recently implemented the ability to customize the initial list of premium data-

Figure 1. Alacra summarizes and indexes each relevant Web site.

bases offered. So now when I choose the "Databases" search option, I find a predefined list of the databases I use frequently, such as Mergerstat, TableBase, and Business and Industry.

For those searches that could retrieve information from a variety of databases and the Internet, I've changed my ways and now start my search by typing my keywords into the search box rather than going directly to a specific database. After trying it a couple of times, I find the display of results encourages me to think about *the type* of information rather than *the database* in which I found the information — which isn't such a bad thing. I mean, aren't we supposed to be thinking in terms of *who* would publish such information?

Let's Put It into Action

Today, when searching for current data on the boiler manufacturing industry, I begin my search by typing a phrase or keywords in the search box on the first page. I can use Boolean logic in this search box or use the "advanced search" feature under the "tools" tab. After running the search, I have several options in the forms of tabs:
• Internet sites

• "News" — content licensed from Moreover and NewsEdge. This news is mostly newswires and some trade publications.
• "Market Research" — links to material from marketresearch.com and mindbranch.com.
• "Premium" — Alacra's fee-based databases.

Internet Sites

I first opt to look at the Internet sites Alacra retrieved on the boiler manufacturing industry. Starting with a broad search on "boilers," Alacra found 235 sites containing 8,318 matching pages. Generally, I like to peruse a few pages of hits to see the type of results found. The first hit was "The Boiler Room," an "Online Community of Manufacturers, Representatives, Engineers…," and the second hit was the American Boiler Manufacturers Association. Not bad in terms of relevancy, but after looking over some of the remaining hits, I find it helpful to sort the Web results by either:
• "Organization Type," such as trade association
• "Industry"
• "Business Topic"
• "Geography"
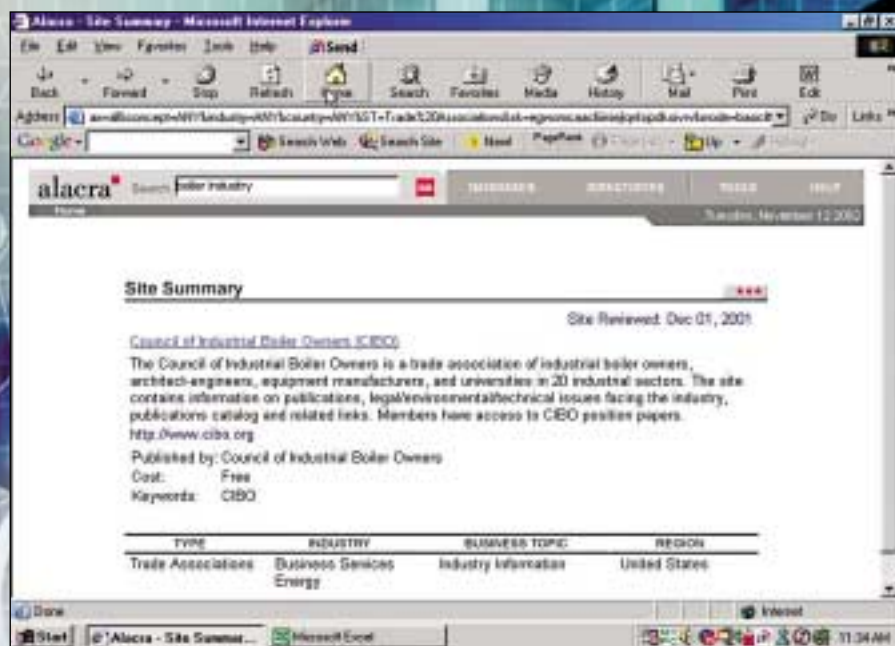• "Format," such as pdf files
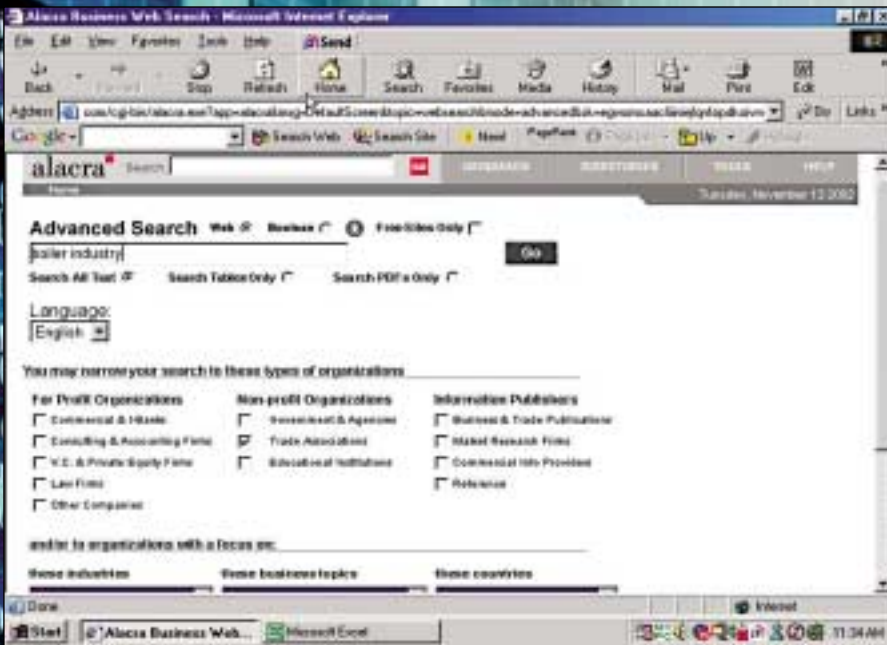
Figure 2. Alacra advanced search.

Putting together a PIB is typically a very time-consuming and laborious process.

Now, Alacra subscribers can literally "build" an entire PIB on the system's "Build a Book" feature. While searchers gather the necessary information from the system's premium databases, Alacra compiles the documents behind the scenes into a PDF file. Searchers add a table of contents and cover sheet and presto! — the PIB is done. The file can then be sent electronically or printed. This value-added service saves information pros a lot of time. [For a more detailed review of the Alacra Book, consult Marydee Ojala's article "Driving Alacra" in the November/December 2001 issue of *ONLINE*.]

Pricing Model

Alacra charges users a set subscription fee of $150 per seat per month. A lot of free information is provided before paying additional information for the premium content. This is especially true when searching for information on public companies.

Conclusion

Of course, changing the way we search a system is always a little bothersome or inconvenient. But the new Alacra has done a good job at balancing the needs of researchers of various levels by developing a streamlined interface that users can navigate in a number of different ways.

As Marydee Ojala wrote, "Alacra has matured considerably since its early days." The Alacra Book is a great idea in information packaging, and combining a collection of the best business-related Web sites with dozens of premium databases enhanced by an in-house authority file shows the searcher community that Alacra strives to offer "cheerful willingness, readiness, or promptness" in delivering the business information we need.
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If I find that I'm still looking through too many Internet sites, I can use the "Advanced Search" feature (see Figure 2 above).

Premium Content

When I finish checking the Internet sites, I look to see what premium or fee-based databases have possible relevant documents based on my keyword search. I find several databases across the board contain documents. I can click on each database to peruse the results and modify the search if necessary.

However, there is one change I'm not thrilled with. After doing a broad search in the old .xls system, such as a search throughout the various market research databases, the system used to display the number of hits found in each file. I liked knowing the number of hits because it gave me an idea of how much information on my topic "was out there." Now, when checking the results from the "premium databases" option, the system no longer lists the number of hits from each database. Apparently, Alacra decided removing this functionality greatly improved the speed and accuracy of the

search results. Now you have to click on the link to a specific database to see the number of hits.

To work around this limitation, search the premium content databases separately by using the system's "Tools" feat.

Note that if you use the "Advanced Search" feature, the index tags such as "Business Topic" or "Industry" apply only to the search of Alacra's "Business Web." The simultaneous search through the premium databases uses only the keywords defined by the searcher, not any additional indexing criteria. Therefore, I often find it necessary to go into each retrieved premium database and further refine my search.

The Alacra Book

Many information professionals in investment banks, law firms, and consultancies are all too familiar with public information books, otherwise known as PIBs, "bibles," or pitch books. PIBs consist of compilations of documents and other information relating to a particular company, manually assembled along with a table of contents and cover sheet.

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