

Northern Light's Business Research Engine

Most information professionals remember Northern Light as one of the Internet search engines from the mid-1990s. They will likely recollect it fondly, as it was one of the few search engines with a focus on the serious researcher. Although its quality features and innovations, like precision searching, premium journal content (called its Special Collection), and its on-the-fly folders for categorizing similar results, were much appreciated by librarians and other substantive researchers, Northern Light was unable to continue to financially support the free search portion of its site. The firm kept up the Special Collection and moved its focus to offering internal solutions, including an enterprise search product and a market research portal called SinglePoint. SinglePoint lets clients search, read, and keep track of all of their licensed market research content with a single login.

In January 2002, Northern Light was purchased by the now defunct (and infamous) Divine, which shortly thereafter announced that it would be ending Northern Light's fee-based special collection. But when Divine went bankrupt in 2003, the founder of Northern Light, David Seuss, was able to purchase back the assets of his firm and began rebuilding it.

In January 2004, Northern Light launched an inexpensive fee-based search site specifically for business called the Business Research Engine (BRE), which has recently been enhanced. In what seems like another positive sign that Northern Light has some cash and is pulling together a valuable collection of premium business research, this past August the firm acquired the IT analyst portal firm Analyst Direct (the publisher of Analyst Views, which compiles a news summary from hundreds of IT analyst Web sites and news releases). Northern Light acquired Analyst Direct from TechTarget, which had acquired the service when it purchased BitPipe, Inc.

Analyst Views is currently being integrated into Northern Light's Business Research Engine, so we thought this would

be a good time to take a close look at this business-oriented search site (<http://www.nlresearch.com>).

Business Research Engine

Our first question when we linked to BRE was whether or not it was truly qualified to be called a *business* search engine. To answer this, we had to review the content and find out what exactly Business Research Engine searches. Let's take a look at what's inside.

The Business Research Engine is divided into three primary segments: Research, News, and Market Intelligence Centers. These segments are separated on the main site.

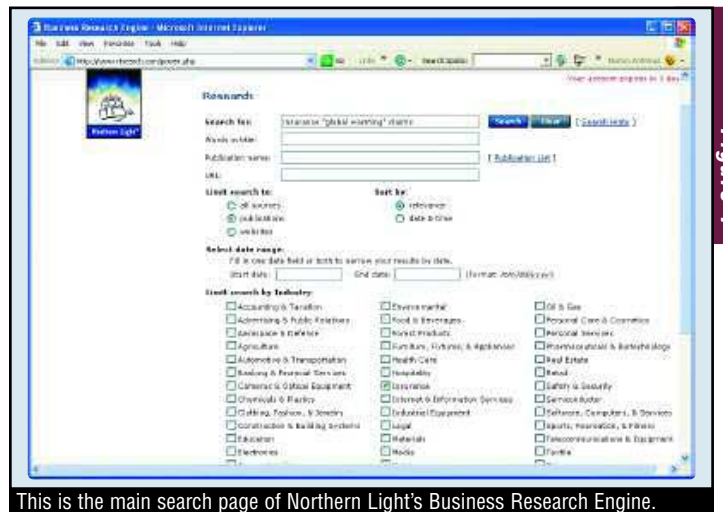


Figure 1

This is the main search page of Northern Light's Business Research Engine.

The Research segment is the heart of this search engine and is the default page when linking to the site (see Figure 1). Here we had an option to search publications, Web sites, or both content sets simultaneously.

BRE's publication collection consists of about 1,400 business-oriented magazines and trade journals that Northern Light selected from ProQuest. The archive extends back 3 years,

and the file is updated daily. Some of the articles are in full-image PDF.

To get a broader sense of BRE's actual industry and subject coverage, we browsed the "publication list" link. When we did this, we discovered which subjects and industries identified here had the greatest number of publications (the number in parentheses represents the total number of journals covering that industry or category):

- Healthcare (280)
- Industries (214)
- Media (206)
- Banking & Financial Services (181)
- Management (122)
- International Business (94)

Note that the Industries category doesn't just contain industry trade journals. Rather, it is something of a catch-all category, with publications covering topics ranging from economics and minority marketing to regional business and scholarly journals, small industry niches, and more.

The bottom line is that this publication set is a very substantive, solid business-oriented collection of publications.

The Web site collection of the Research tab represents what Northern Light calls its "hand-selected" business Web sites; it totals 20 million pages. We found that virtually all of the sites were also substantive and business oriented—and that is no small feat.

The other content in the Business Research Engine can be accessed via the other two tabs: News and Market Intelligence. News consists of news releases from about 70 wire services. While these are solely press releases, the collection was diverse and included not just general wires but business and international wires as well.

Finally, there are the Market Intelligence Centers, which represent a collection of predetermined news, company information and analyses, links, and reports collected by Northern Light's editors on more than a dozen industries:

- Aerospace & Defense
- Agriculture
- Automotive & Transportation
- Banking & Financial Services
- Chemicals & Plastics
- Energy & Utilities
- Environmental
- Healthcare
- Internet & Information Services
- Mergers & Acquisitions
- Oil & Gas
- Pharmaceuticals & Biotechnology
- Private Equity & Venture Capital
- Software, Computers, & Services
- Telecommunications & Equipment

The content included in the Market Intelligence Centers was excellent. It was derived from a range of reliable business sources, from *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post* to journals like *Forbes* and *Fortune*, major survey organizations, wire services, government agencies, and more. The bottom line is that these were all very solid business resources. We also found the stories that we retrieved were quite current—many were published within the last 24 hours.

You can also link to some company profile data via the Market Intelligence Centers. However, except for a link to SEC filings, these are primarily limited to directing the user to pages from the companies' own Web sites.

The other part of the Business Research Engine's content that deserves attention is the integration of Analyst Views, which crawls 300 analyst sites per day to find free content and new reports from leading IT analyst firms like IDC, Gartner, and Forrester. For example, the Oct. 13 newsletter offered an analysis of the growth of flash memory cards as a result of Apple's introduction of its iPod nano. Other topics included open source, VoIP and Skype, the state of IT staffing, a world view on Japan, a new FCC classification of DSL, and the direction of IBM. Analyst Views summarizes its findings in a brief weekly newsletter, which typically provides some top-line data, charts, links to substantive reports and white papers, and references to further resources.

The Analyst Views content rounds out the rest of BRE's content nicely. While the Analyst Views collection currently has its own separate link on the Market Intelligence Centers page, we were told that the firm is working on getting those reports segmented and classified to each of the various industries.

The bottom line is that, in terms of content, Northern Light's Business Research Engine lives up to its name. This is a refreshing change from some other firms' efforts at rolling out what are billed as business search sites but what in actuality are merely company yellow pages or Web sites that are only tangentially useful for business research.

Searching Business Research Engine

Second to content in a reputable business research engine would be the ability for users to create powerful, precise searches and to receive relevant results. The Business Research Engine performed very well, though not flawlessly.

On the main Research page, we had the option to use any or all of the following advanced search features:

- Full Boolean operators
- Truncation and field limits: We could limit our search by words in title, publication name, URL, or by industry by checking one or more of 40 broad industries. (There was also a very small selection of four "limit by function" options, such as sales/marketing, and four seemingly random topical limits: HIPAA, USA PATRIOT Act, Sarbanes-Oxley, and Gramm-Leach-Bliley)

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This can be a nice general way to get a head start on your searching, particularly if you are unfamiliar with the key terms and phrases in the field.

Finally, we found that the search results list was neat and included the critical information on each item—title, abstract, date, and name of source. However, the abstract did not always include our keywords; when it did, it did not bold-face or highlight them, making it a bit tough to quickly go down the list and choose the best items.

Pricing

A subscription to Northern Light's Business Research Engine costs \$50/month per seat for unlimited usage. A free 30-day trial is available. There is also an unlimited enterprise version for \$36,000 per year.

So, what's the bottom line on the Business Research Engine? Here's our overall view of its pros, cons, and value for the business researcher:

Pros

- **Content:** excellent business-focused journals and Web sites
- **Searching:** easy yet powerful searches with fields and limits
- **Design:** intuitive interface and a well-thought-out system overall
- **Special features:** folders help categorize broad topic searches
- **Cost:** excellent value for the price

Cons

- **Content:** As good as BRE's content is, it could be beefed up, particularly with more robust company information resources such as a feed from Hoover's or D&B. We were told that Northern Light is considering adding Investext reports at some point, and this would certainly be a significant addition. It would also be good to see more market research report abstracts and possibly some substantive business blogs.

- **Inconsistent Web results:** While we realize that it is hard to effectively search a business Web selection, we think more attention should be paid to ensuring that the industry limits, folders, and overall search experience delivers what it promises more frequently. We also think the date stamping issue needs to be addressed.

- **Other concerns:** We'd like to see our keywords highlighted in the summary and in the full text of the item. And we think that, these days, any good search service should include an RSS feed, which, as of yet, is not offered.

Business Research Engine is the best low-cost business search site we've come across.

Overall Value

Northern Light's Business Research Engine isn't perfect, but it's the best low-cost business-focused search service we've come across. There are some free general business search sites out there, such as Business.com and Find.com, but we found that neither of these provided a consistent, reliable, and substantive search of the business Web and other quality business sources.

The big question is who is Business Research Engine best suited for? It's rather light for the information professional, but it could be a nice and inexpensive option for sales and marketing professionals and other end users who regularly do focused Web-based business research on their own but need some help in finding sites that are more business-oriented and substantive and who want the ability to do more advanced searching.

We'll be looking forward to Northern Light's continuing efforts to add new features and innovations for the serious business researcher. ■