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Trade associations for industry research

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Trade Associations for Industry Research

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Some of the most challenging questions asked by business researchers involve specialized industries. An entrepreneur may want to know about regulations impacting pawn shop owners, while someone else is seeking your help to identify major trends in the wind turbine industry. Or perhaps a student is looking for the market size for pet products with a breakdown for food and treats. An expensive market research report likely has that type of information, but for an answer that may not cost anything, try a trade association.

What are trade associations and how do you find them?

Trade associations are organizations with members that have a special interest in a particular industry or trade. The Internal Revenue Service (IRS) classifies trade associations as “business leagues” that are tax-exempt organizations under IRS Code Section 501(c)(3), and according to the [2018 IRS Data Book](#), there are over 62,000 in the United States.

Trade associations, or the “trades,” can be identified using both free and for-fee resources. One longstanding source found at many libraries is the [Encyclopedia of Associations](#), available through Gale’s collection of directories or the database [Associations Unlimited](#). Another useful resource, which is helpful for finding listings of trade publications, is ProQuest’s [Ulrich’s Periodicals Directory](#), also available through the [Ulrichsweb](#) database. Other for-fee sources that provide leads to trade information are subscription databases for industry research, such as [IBISWorld](#) or [First Research](#).

Because business reporters often turn to the trades for information, another way to identify trade associations is to look for them as cited sources in news articles. A *Wall Street Journal* reporter writing an article on the fast food industry may quote a representative from the [National Restaurant Association](#) or interview someone from a foodservice association at the state level, depending on the focus of the piece. Find those quotes in the article and you have a lead for your research. Also look for trade associations listed as sources under tables and infographics in business news articles.

Googling for trade associations

If you do not have easy access to subscription research resources for finding the trades, try a simple Google search. Combine a keyword or phrase that describes an industry (ex: automotive) with the word “association” in the Google search box. With a quick scan of the search results, you will likely find the names of several trade sites relevant to the industry, and at the bottom of the results screen, Google will list additional suggested searches for you.

Example: [National Automobile Dealers Association](#)

You can also conduct a Google search to find LibGuides (online research guides) with links to trade sources. Librarians at academic institutions often assist business students with industry research and will include trade association websites as resources in course LibGuides. Find those guides with a Google search that includes an industry descriptor and the word “LibGuide.”

Example: [Ski/Snow Industry Resources LibGuide--University of Denver](#)

In areas of the country dominated by a specific industry, librarians may create a guide with links to free resources, such as trade sites, to help local business owners with research. One example is the Brooklyn Public Library (New York), which has created an industry guide with suggested trade sources for fashion entrepreneurs: <https://bklynlibrary.libguides.com/fashion>

Navigating a trade association website

In addition to serving as an industry advocate, a trade association may conduct research, offer training, and follow trends for its members. While some content on an association’s website may be for “members only,” it is not unusual for an association to also post information for the public. Besides press kits for the media, many provide free access to association newsletters or magazines, which are known as trade publications. Look for these under website menu headings such as “News,” “Publications,” and “Resources.”

Example: [International Carwash Association--Carwash Magazine](#)

If a trade publication is not available on an association’s website, look for it on a database at your library. Business databases can provide full-text access to articles from hundreds of trade publications. To find those articles, search the database for information on a business topic and filter the search results by source or publication type. Or review the subject listing to identify trade publications indexed on the database, and then browse for your topics of interest.

Trade associations also sponsor special studies, such as annual “State of the Industry” reports or rankings of the “top 100 companies.” While you may have to pay for the most recent industry study, you can explore the association’s website for a free summary with

helpful facts and statistics. Or look for an earlier study edition that might be available to non-members at no charge.

Example: [Cruise Lines International Association--State of the Cruise Industry Outlook](#)

Another tip for business researchers is to scan a trade association's website for a listing of its members. A member directory can help you find company executives, spot potential sales leads, and identify major players in the industry supply chain. In addition, the national site for a trade association may have links to state chapters, which can be a source of local industry information.

Example: [Greeting Card Association: Member Directory](#)

In summary, trade associations can be an excellent source of industry information. While not all content on a trade website is free, it is worthwhile to review the site for leads or as a way to connect with industry experts. If the information you are seeking is not online, a quick email or phone call to the association may put you in touch with a trade representative who is willing to share an excerpt from a study or offer professional advice for researching an industry.

And if you find yourself becoming a frequent visitor to a trade association website, it might be time to consider membership options to gain full access to the association's resources and services. Many trade associations offer affiliate memberships for non-profit organizations, including libraries. When weighed against the cost of other industry research resources, an annual membership to a trade association may be the best solution for answering those tough questions. As for those posed at the beginning of this article? Try these trade associations:

- Regulations impacting pawn shop owners: [National Pawnbrokers Association](#)
- Major trends in the wind turbine industry: [American Wind Energy Association](#)
- Market size for pet products: [American Pet Products Association](#)