

The InfoPack Solution

There sure seems to be a wide gap between answering freebie email or helpline tech questions and nailing down profitable longer term consulting tasks. One useful way that I have found to fill this gap is with my new *InfoPack* resource service.

An *InfoPack* is "cash and carry" consulting.

InfoPacks are roughly similar to a lawyer referral's first hour conference. For the \$79 charge of about one hour's professional consulting, the client gets a specially prepared custom notebook. One that contains explicit resources, key players, source docs, trade journals, patents, major books, scholarly pubs, web links, and supply houses. Along with a personal feasibility analysis. Examples of typical *InfoPack* topics include...

Active noise cancellation for large ventilators
Broadband 90 degree phase difference networks
Cost effective flat panel instrumentation displays
Custom handheld data acquisition computer survey
Laser engraving graphical interface algorithms
Piezoelectric atomizer physics and resources

To the client, the *InfoPack* advantages include receiving accurate and fundamental answers without committing themselves to a costly consulting program. It also gives them a "Let's see what this guy can do" low risk option. Both are highly useful when exploring a new tech area in which they may have no expertise. Or don't have the time or inclination to fully and personally explore.

To you as provider, *InfoPack* benefits are: (a) with care, they can be profitable in themselves; (b) they often lead to formal consulting you would not otherwise get; (c) by "mining fallout", all sorts of publishing possibilities and new research venues can be explored; and (d) recurring research themes can be combined and converted into semicustom and stocked *special interest packets* marketed to a wider audience. Some examples include...

Acrobat Catalog Data Formats
Custom Web Log File Monitoring
Emerging Technical Opportunities
Exploring PIC PostScript Robotics
Santa Claus Rapid Prototyping
Some Pseudoscience Wonderments
Using PostScript as Language

Thus, properly crafted *InfoPacks* might be profitable in themselves. As well as serving as a useful gateway towards creating other new products for you.

Some Concepts

Your inside trick, of course is making your *InfoPack* generation process fast and efficient. While at the same time ending up genuinely useful to your potential new client. The *InfoPack* should meet your client's needs with *or without your further involvement*. But always done in such a way as to leave them more than favorably inclined towards working further with you.

One key rule is to *never accept what you can not or do not want to deliver*. If the client is not happy with the results, all your time and effort is largely wasted.

Strictly limit what you provide to what you are an expert in. I also personally turn down those "gray" areas (cable boxes, satellite theft, dongles, cellular scams, and such); anything government or military; anything confidential to the point of being paranoid; or anything foreign. Plus anything where the client seems so utterly clueless that they do not have a snowball's chance in hell.

InfoPack payment is strictly VISA or MASTERCARD.

Efficiency

Again, the real secret lies in doing an *InfoPack* as quickly as you possibly can. My usual goal is to do this within one high energy hour, two casual hours, and a support hour. While two day service is advertised, I can do a better job if the research is spread over three or four days.

Typically, I'll quickly gather up whatever shakes loose from my own personal resources, *briefly* hit the web, check a trade journal or two, and let the stuff pile up. Then I'll think about what the client *really* wants during a bicycle ride. After the client needs start to jell, I'll spend one intensive online hour pulling in the needed info, followed up by a personal analysis letter.

Finally, I'll have Bee gather the results up into a properly boilerplated and formatted slip-in custom notebook and ship it off UPS blue.

A typical *InfoPack* might be fifty pages or more. But something exceptionally intense could conceivably end up as short as a single paragraph. It all depends upon the ratio of my "gathering" to "analysis" times.

With practice, you can easily put together in one high energy hour what it would take your client many weeks to accomplish. And do a vastly better job of it in the process. Especially when you factor in chance favoring the prepared mind, ongoing skills in selecting elusive keywords, and serendipity in general.

Putting the Info into the Pack

So where does InfoPack content come from?

First and foremost, from your own resources, writings, data books, lit files, and trade journal stashes. Second, from a nearby library. Third, and the real 500 pound gorilla is to aggressively use the web.

Here are my top secret insider web tools...

Search engines– Your usual starting point in web research is with a search engine. My favorite is www.hotbot.com, while www.altavista.digital is also useful and popular. There's a well organized meta search site you will find at www.wp.com/resch/search.htm and an "inference" gathering service at www.inference.com/infind Tutorials on search engines appear at www.searchenginewatch.com

Technical web sites– I've got bunches of links to these on my web site at www.tinaja.com The electrical engineering ones center on www.tinaja.com/eeweb01.html. Two tech links I find especially useful are techweb.cmp.com/eet and the new QuestLink service at www.questlink.com

Trade journals– Web or no, the industry trade journals remain your keys to any technical kingdom. Your best source for info on these used to be *Ulrich's Periodicals Dictionary*. Found on the reference shelf of your local library. But these days, that free online *Oxbridge Media Finder* at www.mediafinder.com is far faster and more flexible. Besides powerful search features, this even includes related hot links and a sample copy service. Sadly, it provides phone numbers but not addresses.

Books– Similarly, the best place to find out what books have or shortly will be published on any subject was once *Books in Print* and their *Forthcoming Books* companion. Again per your local library. But *Amazon Books*, reached through my www.tinaja.com/amlink01.html link is by far your best choice today.

The popularity of any title can easily be gauged by Amazon's ship date. They only tend to stock the really fast moving "ships in 24 hours" winners.

Thomas Registry– Unlike most of the traditional library reference works, the *Thomas Registry of Manufacturers* is readily available and can now easily be searched on line at www.thomasregister.com This one is particularly good at "who makes what". Especially for firms and industries that are not yet fully web literate.

Patents– As a general rule, the winners end up in the marketplace and losers end up in the patent directories. And any sort of involvement with patents by an individual or small scale startup most often turns out to be highly inappropriate. If you must search patents, though, a new power service is found at patent.womplex.ibm.com

Address Finders– Good places to find names and numbers include www.lookupusa.com and www.switchboard.com, while Bell toll free numbers appear at att.net/dir800 The official Zip code directory is found at www.usps.gov/ncsc.

My favorite internet address tool is www.whowhere.com. Competitors include *Four11* at www.drebes.com, *Infospace* at www.infospace.com and *Bigfoot* at bigfoot.com

Useful maps are found both at previously mentioned *Switchboard* and from *MapQuest* at www.mapquest.com

Newsgroups– There are now tens of thousands of online newsgroups, so the chances are that someone is posting something about your topic someplace right now. Sadly, certain newsgroups are dominated by flammers and trolls who quickly drive the competent contributors away. And many messages may have hidden agendas or be just plain wrong. Other newsgroups may have negligible traffic.

Remember that net stands for *not entirely true*.

At any rate, your first and foremost entry point into the newsgroups is *Deja News* at web3.dejanews.com A directory of most frequently asked newsgroup questions purportedly appears at www.faqlib.com, but some access problems seem to be newly cropping up.

Newsgroups can be used several ways. One is to simply find where on the web such content appears. A second is to directly contact credible posters via personal email. Third is actually posting your own questions to the group.

By the way, *Deja News* also gives you a sneaky way to check on a poster's background and competence. You can click to find the other recent posts they've made. From these you can evaluate who you are dealing with. One superb newsgroup for technical topics can be found at sci.electronics.design I've placed a searchable and hot linked 12,000 newsgroup list to www.tinaja.com/text/newslist.html

Newsletters and ezines– Newsletters are subscription only services that generally give you higher and better technical content than newsgroups. But do so at the expense of flooding you with email or overloading you with hard to answer digest files. The definitive newsletter finder seems to be *P.A.M.L.* at www.NeoSoft.com/internet/paml

Ezines instead are online electronic magazines that may or may not have printed hard copy companions. My own *Blatant Opportunist* is now an online ezine. The definitive ezine list appears to be sponsored by a John Labvovitz at www.meer.net/~johnl/e-zine-list, while useful competitors include www.dominis.com/Zines and www.edoc.com/ejurnal For a bizarre collection of both ezines and real zines, check out www.factsheet5.com.

Some Mechanics

Looseleaf format makes the most sense, allowing the client to rearrange, edit, and append to please himself. Notebooks with "slide in" covers and spines are readily available. One tip: Standard 3-hole punching will demand an edge trim to properly fit a half inch notebook.

Fancy cover and divider graphics can largely be shared among all of the InfoPacks. And generated from a common file. I prefer use of *Revue* or *StoneSans* fonts. You should, of course, find something else that works for you.

Be sure to put the client's name prominently on the cover. And while seeking out further work should be an important goal of an InfoPack, do remember that the InfoPack must stand alone and must deliver what the client asked for in the first place.

For More Help

I've gathered many of the mentioned web links together for you in the nearby sidebar. When you are viewing this online, any blue text is hotlinked and should take you directly to the referenced site when mouse clicked. These links also appear more conveniently arranged on my own

MENTIONED WEB LINKS

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address finder	www.infospace.com
address finder	www.whowhere.com
book locator	www.tinaja.com/amlink01.html
consulting net	net www.tinaja.com/consul01.html
electronic data	www.tinaja.com/eeweb01.html
ezine & zines	www.factsheet5.com
ezine directory	www.meer.net/~johnl/e-zine-list
ezine directory	www.dominis.com/Zines
ezine directory	www.edoc.com/ejurnal
faq library	www.faqlib.com
infopacks	www.tinaja.com/info1.html
manufacturers	www.thomasregister.com
maps	www.mapquest.com/map
newsgroup finder	www.tinaja.com/text/newslist.html
newsletter index	www.NeoSoft.com/internet/pam1
newsgroup search	web3.dejanews.com
search tutorials	www.searchenginewatch.com
search engine	www.altavista.digital.com
search engine	www.hotbot.com
search engine	www.inference.com/infind
search engine	www.wp.com/resch/search.htm
patent stash	patent.womplex.ibm.com
patents	www.tinaja.com/patnt01.html
phone numbers	www.lookupusa.com
phone numbers	www.switchboard.com
resource help	www.tinaja.com/resbn01.html
technical info	techweb.cmp.com/eet
tech info	news:sci.electronics.design
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technical ventures	www.tinaja.com/ismm01.html
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Additional details on my InfoPack service do appear in <http://www.tinaja.com/info1.html> More on your own tech venture is in my *Incredible Secret Money Machine II*. You can preview portions at www.tinaja.com/ismm01.html

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Microcomputer pioneer and guru Don Lancaster is the author of 35 books and countless articles. Don maintains a US technical helpline you'll find at (520) 428-4073, besides offering all his own books, reprints and consulting services.

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