Recycling Online

Tackling patent searching
by Roger Guttentag

Since this is the July issue of *Resource Recycling,* I imagine you are busily reviewing its pages for new equipment or technologies that may be needed by your recycling operations. One common denominator these products probably all share is the use of patents to protect the intellectual property rights of the companies that manufacture them. The use of patents as a legal tool for encouraging technical innovation originated centuries earlier in Europe prior the establishment of the American republic. The usefulness of granting patents for that purpose was acknowledged by the framers of the U.S. Constitution through its inclusion in Article 1, Section 8 as one of the powers granted to Congress.

What is a patent?

There are thousands of sites that discuss what patents are and how the patent process works. Most are oriented to serving the needs of professionals working in technical development or intellectual property fields. However, I have several recommended starting points based on having sections that I consider reasonably accessible to anyone who is not familiar with this topic. They are:

- United States Patent and Trademark Office (USPTO)
- University of California at San Diego Patent Library Guide (UCPLG)
- Massachusetts Institute of Technology Patents Library Guide (MITPLG)
- Patent Lens (PL) – a project sponsored by Cambia, a non-governmental organization that focuses on promoting technical innovation globally.

The MITPLG section About Patents provides probably the simplest explanation of what a patent is and its legal purpose. Then go to the PL site and click on the link to "Top 10 things you should know about patents" to view an interesting discussion on what patents do or don't do. For example, a patent doesn't mean that no one will be allowed by law to infringe on it or if they do they will be charged with a crime (rather, it is considered a purely civil matter). Also, patents are only valid in the country they are issued.

While you are on the PL site, go to "How to read a patent" for guidance on what information is contained in a patent document and what it means. If you encounter technical terms that you find confusing – and I'm sure you will – then head back to the MITPLG and consult "Understanding "Patentese – A Patent Glossary" that can be found under the More Help section. Finally, take some time to review the PowerPoint slide presentation from a patent workshop sponsored by the UCPLG that provides a comprehensive summary on what patents are, the patent application process and some basics on patent searching.

Why conduct patent searches?

The various previous resources that I have discussed should, after review, provide a number of sound reasons why becoming familiar with patent searching is a good idea. These include:

- Determining if a particular technical idea or process is already covered by any existing patents.
- Reducing the cost or improving the quality of a patent application by using available free search resources. This is more fully explained in a short article "The Value of a Patent Search" on the University of Maine library site.
- Obtaining detailed information on new technologies not available through other public sources.
- Using it as part of a market intelligence and competitive assessment strategy.

Web Address Directory

Free Patents Online	http://www.freepatentsonline.com/
Google Patent Search (1)	http://tinyurl.com/GPatent
How to Patent Search (You Tube Video) Parts 1-3	http://tinyurl.com/YTPatent
MIT Libraries – Patents	http://tinyurl.com/MITPatent
Patent Lens	http://www.patentlens.net/
Patent Storm	http://www.patentstorm.us/
United States Patent and Trademark Office	http://www.uspto.gov/patents/
United States Patent and Trademark Office – Search for Patents	http://www.uspto.gov/patents/process/search/
University of California – San Diego LibGuide: Patents	http://tinyurl.com/UCSDPatent
University of Maine Library – The Value of a Patent Search	http://tinyurl.com/UMPatent
University of Texas at Austin – Patent Searching	http://tinyurl.com/UTPatent
World Intellectual Property Organization	http://tinyurl.com/WIPOPatents

Alternatively, you can start at the Google home page, select *More* and then *Even More.*

What patent research tools are available?

There are fortunately a number of free patent databases that are Web-accessible. Some of the more well-known ones are:

- Free Patents Online
- Google Patent Search
- Patent Storm
- United States Patent and Trademark Office

The Web addresses for these sites are listed at the end of this column. Google Patent Search is one of the most popular search tools, since it is well known and simple to use. It also has several other advantages such as providing search results for both applied and issued patents and allowing the user to download specific results as PDF files. You can start by just typing in certain keywords and reviewing the search results either as a list or a grid. You also have the option, based on selections made from a left column menu to restrict search results on the basis of filing status, date, patent type or relevance. At the bottom of the search results is a link to the Advanced Search menu which provides additional search filters, such as the inventor's name or specific patent classification numbers.

There are two additional resources that are helpful to know about with respect to patent searching. If you want to know more about the patent search tools mentioned above or get information on other search tool choices then go the Intellogist wiki and click on Search System Reports. This leads to a menu of 37 report links to different free and fee-only patent search tools. Clicking on Google Patent Search, for example, goes to a listing of links to various report sections such as an overview, recent major updates, system features and pricing.

On the other hand, if you need to locate the intellectual property offices of different countries, then your best bet would be the World Intellectual Property Organization (WIPO). Select Resources from the top home page menu and then select Directory of IP offices. You can browse through a country listing or, alternatively, select from a drop-down menu. Selecting a country will lead you to contact information, as well as a URL link.

How do you start learning the basics of patent searching?

If you are new to patent searching, there are online tutorials that can help reduce the steepness of the initial learning curve. One example that you can try is the patent search tutorial maintained by the University of Texas at Austin Library. It consists of nine sections that can be accessed sequentially, or individually, and it provides a concise introduction to this topic. The USPTO also has an extensive, 36-minute online tutorial, as well, on how to use its patent search system. There are also patent search tutorial videos you can find on YouTube, and I provide a link in the Web Address Directory to an example I found that uses Google and the USPTO as examples. However, you should be careful about which videos you use, since patent search tools often go through major updates, so I would advise using only those that have been posted since January 2012.

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