



Bonsai Research

Bonsai gardening has always interested me, although I don't have the patience required to practice this ancient horticultural art myself. I admire the skill of bonsai gardeners, who can create a miniature version of an elm or maple tree through careful cultivation, pruning, and patience. While the techniques used to maintain a bonsai are different from those to encourage healthy growth in a full-size tree, each requires the skills and understanding of an expert gardener.

I am beginning to appreciate the different types of tree care as I have become involved in supporting local businesses through what is called "economic gardening." (See more about this economic development approach at nationalcen.org.) These projects usually require research into very narrowly focused markets—the potential buyers of refurbished military helicopters, the possible markets for a new type of athletic mouth guard, or the countries with the most respiratory therapy training programs.

These nichey projects often remind me of bonsai gardening. The usual approaches to market research—look for industry profiles, buy a market research report, read the financial filings of the big players, find relevant analyst reports—do not work when the entire market is too small for most industry observers to notice. You have to put the pruning saw and garden hoe back in the toolshed and bring out your twig shears and tweezers; bonsai research requires a different set of skills and a different approach to finding information. Here are some of the specialized tools and approaches for this type of research.

You cannot predict where you will find the answer. Most trade publications take a national or international perspective on their markets, so finding information on the market for fleet management services in rural parts of Arkansas can get tricky. These projects often require looking for adjacent industries that might provide clues or indicators of the potential market—identifying regional trade shows relevant to business owners likely to have a rural fleet of vehicles, for example.

You have to get comfortable with uncertainty. You begin a bonsai research project with a reminder to yourself that you have no idea where you will find the answer. Your first few searches will often involve throwing a few words into Google and seeing what pops up. You check to see if a LibGuide already exists on the topic. (A quick and dirty approach is to just add `inurl:libguides` to your Google search.)

You spend 15 minutes flailing around and think the project is impossible, and then on the fifth page of the search results, you find an interview with a local expert or a study from a university that gives you important insight into the market.

Sources you may have disdained for big-tree projects—presentation decks from SlideShare, say, or Wikipedia articles—may have the most relevant information you can find for this bonsai project. In a sense, SlideShare is similar to interviewing an expert to gather information not available in the published literature, although without the ability to ask follow-up questions. And you may have to trust that Wikipedia articles, while perhaps inherently less reliable than sources vetted by editors and publishers, have at least been viewed by enough eyes for the most egregious errors to have been corrected.

You have to give answers, not just information. Most bonsai research projects involve ambiguity and uncertainty; you are using your skills as an information professional to distill what you found into a one-paragraph summary. That isn't the entire deliverable, of course, but it serves as a guide to identify what is important in the material you found. If it appears, based on what you could find within this project's time frame and budget, that the main market for a specialized thin-film coating is the fastener industry, then say so. Bonsai projects tend to be action-driven, so the client wants a report that enables decisions regarding next steps. Two of the most useful questions during a bonsai project reference interview are "What will you be doing with the report I send you?" and "What would help make it more useful?"

You have to know when to say when. Bonsai research projects are hard; if it were easy to find narrowly focused market information, the client would have found it already. There is always another approach to take, another government agency website to search through, another association that might have some useful information. Economic gardening clients also tend to have champagne tastes and beer budgets when it comes to market research. Thus, as a bonsai searcher, you have to manage your time carefully. Sometimes you just have to pull your hands from the keyboard and call it quits; there may be more information out there, but the budget cannot cover the time and effort needed for a comprehensive search.

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