

## California firm uses online property document database for fast and efficient research.

Christopher W. Lerch, PLS, spends a lot of time at his desk doing important research for clients and preparing jobs for field crews. The principal and senior surveyor with Laugenour and Meikle Civil Engineers and Land Surveyors (L&M) in Woodland, Calif., has been a part of the L&M team for 22 of the firm's 53 years. According to Lerch, he "started at the bottom" and has risen through the ranks. He once spent his days outside in the field; today he's "mostly working in the office on boundary resolutions, proposals and getting jobs ready for the crews to go out in the field."

Because of the important role Lerch serves at L&M, he regularly seeks methods to work more efficiently, thereby serving L&M's crews and clients better. "Everybody wants everything yesterday," Lerch says. So he took note in spring 2005 when he came across DocEdge.com, a web-enabled database of property records. After some consideration, L&M subscribed to DocEdge.com, which has enabled Lerch and his firm to save time and money, and to retain clients—areas all surveying firms seek to improve.

### An Online Research Tool

As a full-service surveying and civil engineering firm, L&M frequently performs boundary and topographic

work for design. The firm maintains four survey crews year round, and tries to maximize efficiency by performing extensive research before sending them out to the field. "We need a research tool to get information on ownership, such as property deeds, easement documents and assessors' information to establish boundary base line information," Lerch says. Improvement in the research process, Lerch knew, could reduce the number of trips a crew needed to make to a project site, and would serve to benefit the firm's overall operations.

DocEdge.com is a product of First American Data Tree of Santa Ana, Calif., a property information company. DocEdge.com delivers land documents through an online interface to a variety of clients in need of property information, including surveyors. The DocEdge.com property database includes current and historical land record document images such as assessor maps, parcel maps, subdivision maps, deeds, mortgages, liens and judgments.

After hearing about DocEdge.com, Lerch and one of his partners at L&M scheduled a phone conference to learn more about it. Prior to this, L&M had been using another database service that only offered access to assessor's maps and owners' information. During the conference call, both parties agreed to a trial run allowing L&M a chance to test Data Tree's offerings. "It took us about a month to figure out we didn't need the other service and we were happy with DocEdge.com," Lerch says, noting that its database offers access to additional documents that aid his research of deeds and boundaries.

DocEdge.com is accessible 24 hours a day from any web-enabled computer, and features productivity tools that allow the user to view, enlarge, save, annotate, print or E-mail document images directly from the user's browser. Lerch accesses his DocEdge.com account with a username and password. Once in the system, he can search for the documents he needs by street address, owner name, assessor parcel number or document number.

### Quick Turnaround Time

L&M, based in Yolo County in the Sacramento Valley, performs surveys in several other counties in northern California, including the neighboring counties of Solano, Sacramento, Sutter and Colusa. When creating proposals for clients, this multi-county work can become expensive and time-consuming. "In the past," Lerch says, "we had to send a survey technician to the other counties to get the information so I could prepare a client proposal. Travel time would be, on average, an hour to get to the county recorder's or county surveyor's

L&M's senior surveyor, Christopher Lerch, PLS, uses DocEdge.com to expedite his research when drawing up proposals for clients.





office. And this was at the proposal stage so I didn't even know if we were going to be retained for the job."



Now, with his immediate access to the DocEdge.com database of documents, Lerch will sometimes start typing in the assessor's parcel number to search for the deed and related documents while he's still on the phone with a prospective client. "Everyone wants a ballpark [figure]," Lerch says, explaining that if he can see where the property is and knows that L&M has previously done work in the area, he can sometimes give the potential customer a rough estimate of how much the work will cost before he hangs up the phone.

Access to DocEdge.com also "comes in very handy," according to Lerch, for pipeline surveys. L&M's clients include natural gas companies and irrigation districts who need pipeline surveys that extend through several different properties. When this work is contracted, L&M's surveyors need information on all of the properties along the route so they can prepare easement descriptions going through those properties. And it's all readily available on DocEdge.com, helping Lerch and the rest of the L&M employees quickly meet the needs of their customers.

### Paying for Itself

Pricing for Data Tree's services is often customized and varies depending on customer need and usage. Lerch estimates that L&M spends, on average, \$400 a month for its subscription, paying a single fee for each document downloaded. Compared to how L&M used to operate, Lerch says, "We're probably saving a couple thousand dollars a month or more." Having instant, online access to property documents prevents Lerch from having to send a technician on a two-hour trip to get a one-page document.

"We really like the set price for every document," he adds. "If you go to a county recorder's office for a document you need, it can be 20-30 pages long. And it will cost \$2 for the first page and a dollar or two for every page after that." Lerch points out that a 30-page document could easily cost as much as \$60. Contrasting that with Data Tree's service, Lerch is convinced L&M's investment is worth it: each document downloaded from DocEdge.com costs \$5 no matter the length. Once he finds the information he needs, Lerch can print or save documents to the project file in L&M's computer system.

### Satisfied Clients Return

"We're always looking for the best equipment and technology," Lerch says, adding that he thinks L&M is staying on top with its current subscription to Data Tree's DocEdge.com service. Lerch is very satisfied with the return on L&M's investment in Data Tree because of the time and money it has saved in the research process. L&M's clients benefit from this efficiency as well. "We have a large number of return clients at our firm, and you don't get return clients if they're not satisfied with your service." ☺

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First American Data Tree  
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