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SEC EDGAR Full-Text Search: Find Private Companies

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What EDGAR full-text search covers

A private company files almost nothing with the SEC, but its name often turns up in public companies' filings: an acquirer's press release, a customer's supply agreement, a parent's subsidiary list. EDGAR full-text search is the free tool for finding those mentions.

The SEC's FAQ states the scope plainly: full-text search covers "the full text of all EDGAR filings submitted electronically since 2001," and the full text "includes all data in the filing itself as well as all attachments (such as exhibits)" (SEC full-text search FAQ). The search page itself describes the same coverage, the full text of electronic filings since 2001 (SEC EDGAR full-text search). Exhibits matter most: many private-company names appear only in one (a press release filed as Exhibit 99.1, a material contract, a subsidiary list), not in the body of the form.

Three properties shape how you use it:

- **It is keyword search, not question answering.** The FAQ says natural-language search is "not currently supported" (FAQ). Asking "which public companies bought HVAC contractors in Ohio" returns noise; name the words a filing would contain.
- **It searches registrants' documents.** A mention exists only if a filer chose, or was required, to write the name down. Private-to-private deals, small add-ons below disclosure thresholds and confidential commercial terms never reach EDGAR.
- **Results are ranked by relevance, not date.** The FAQ explains that a document scores higher when the term appears many times across content and metadata fields (FAQ). For research, sort by filing date, or narrow with form type and a date range, before you conclude something is missing.

For two document types covered elsewhere, see the Exhibit 21 corporate family mapping guide and what a Form D filing can prove.

Query syntax that matters

The FAQ documents a small operator set; the example queries are illustrative (FAQ).

Operator	Behaviour per the SEC FAQ	Illustrative query
Implied AND	All words and phrases are required by default; typing AND is "neither required nor recognized"	`"fire protection" "privately held"`
Exact phrase	Quotation marks find the words in the exact order	`"commercial landscaping"`
Exclusion	A hyphen or capitalised NOT before a term excludes documents containing it	`"fire protection" -insurance`
OR	At least one of the terms separated by a capitalised OR must appear	`"HVAC" OR "mechanical contractor"`
NEAR	Two terms within 10 words by default; `NEAR(5)` sets a different distance	`acquired NEAR(5) "privately held"`

Operator	Behaviour per the SEC FAQ	Illustrative query
Wildcard	* appended to a stem; not at the start or middle of a word, and not inside exact phrases or Boolean searches	`landscap*`
Case	Search is case-insensitive	`"Department of Energy" = "department of energy"`

Advanced options let you restrict by form type and by date, with preset ranges ("All (since 2001)", last five years, last year, last 30 days) or a custom start and end date in yyyy-mm-dd format (FAQ). You can also search by company name, ticker or CIK number (FAQ), but that searches *filers*. A private company is usually not a filer, so its name belongs in quotation marks in the main query box.

Two test searches run on 2026-10-28 over filings dated 2025:

- `"privately held" "fire protection" acquisition` and `"privately-held" "fire protection" acquisition` in Form 10-K returned the same count (33). Check both spellings on your own queries anyway.
- `"privately held" "HVAC"` in Form 8-K returned 6 documents, while `"privately held" NEAR(5) "HVAC"` returned 0. A zero from a proximity query is not evidence that no filing exists. Run the plain AND query first, then tighten.

Where private companies show up

The rule that forces a name into a filing tells you which forms to search and what you will *not* find.

Form 8-K, Item 1.01: material definitive agreements

A registrant that enters into a material definitive agreement "not made in the ordinary course of business" must disclose the date, "the identity of the parties to the agreement" and a brief description of the material terms (SEC Form 8-K, Item 1.01). A material definitive agreement is one that provides for obligations material to and enforceable against the registrant, or rights material to the registrant and enforceable by it (Form 8-K). Unless otherwise specified, a Form 8-K is due within four business days of the event (Form 8-K, General Instruction B). For a private company, Item 1.01 is where a supply, licence, distribution or purchase agreement with a public counterparty can surface.

Form 8-K, Item 2.01: completed acquisitions and dispositions

Item 2.01 requires the date of completion, a description of the assets and "the identity of the person(s) from whom the assets were acquired" (Form 8-K, Item 2.01). The trigger is size. An acquisition involves "a significant amount of assets" if the registrant's equity in the net book value of the assets, or the amount paid, "exceeded 10 percent of the total assets of the registrant and its consolidated subsidiaries," or if it involved a business that is significant under Regulation S-X (Form 8-K, Item 2.01, Instruction 4).

A large filer buying a small private business usually falls below it, though the deal may still appear in a press-release exhibit or the acquisitions note of the next 10-K or 10-Q. In our 2025 test, all six 8-K hits for `"privately held" "HVAC"` were press-release exhibits (EX-99.1 or EX-99.2), not the 8-K body.

Exhibit 10: material contracts

Item 601(b)(10) of Regulation S-K requires registrants to file contracts not made in the ordinary course of business that are material (17 CFR 229.601(b)(10)). Even ordinary-course contracts must be filed if the registrant's business is "substantially dependent" on them, for example "continuing contracts to sell the major part of registrant's products or services or to purchase the major part of registrant's requirements," or if they involve property, plant or equipment above 15 percent of consolidated fixed assets (17 CFR 229.601(b)(10)(ii)). That is how a private sole supplier or key distributor gets named in a public filing.

Registrants may redact specific provisions that are both not material and the type they treat as private or confidential, marking the omissions with brackets (17 CFR 229.601(b)(10)(iv)). Expect pricing and volume terms to be blacked out even when the counterparty name is visible.

Exhibit 21: subsidiaries

Item 601(b)(21) requires a list of all subsidiaries with their state or other jurisdiction of incorporation or organization and the names under which they do business (17 CFR 229.601(b)(21)). Subsidiaries that together would not constitute a significant subsidiary may be omitted (17 CFR 229.601(b)(21)(ii)). Exhibit 21 tells you a company is *no longer* independent, which is a disqualifier for most origination mandates. Full-text search indexes these exhibits: a 2025 test query restricted to Form 10-K returned files typed EX-21 and EX-21.1 alongside the 10-K bodies. Reading the exhibit properly is covered in the Exhibit 21 guide.

Everything else

Registration statements, proxy statements and periodic reports name competitors, customers, landlords and acquired businesses in narrative sections. A 2025-dated test search for `"commercial landscaping"` across all forms returned 47 documents spread over 17 distinct form or exhibit types; restricting to one form type early would have missed most of them.

Search recipes by research question

Queries are illustrative; replace the bracketed placeholders and check results against the filing text.

Research question	Form types to include	Query pattern (illustrative)	What a hit can show
Has the target already been acquired?	8-K, 10-K, 10-Q	`"[Target Legal Name]" acquired`	Acquisition announcement, closing, or acquisitions note
Is the target a subsidiary of a filer?	10-K (Exhibit 21)	`"[Target Legal Name]"` with form 10-K	Listed subsidiary and jurisdiction
Who are its public customers or suppliers?	8-K, 10-K, 10-Q	`"[Target Name]" agreement`	Named counterparty in a material contract or risk factor
Which public acquirers buy in this niche?	8-K	`"privately held" "[niche phrase]"`	Press releases describing add-on acquisitions

Research question	Form types to include	Query pattern (illustrative)	What a hit can show
Has the target raised exempt capital?	D	`"[Target Legal Name]"` with form D	Form D issuer record (see limits below)
Did a public company sell a division that could become a platform?	8-K	`divestiture "[segment phrase]"`	Disposition announcements, buyer identity
Is the founder on a public board or named in a related-party note?	DEF 14A, 10-K	`"[Owner Full Name]"`	Related-party transactions, board service

Two habits make the recipes productive:

1. **Search every name variant separately:** legal name, name without the entity suffix, DBA, former names and brand. "Ridgeline Mechanical Services, LLC" (fictional) in a contract can be "Ridgeline Mechanical" in a press release.
2. **Run each recipe twice: all dates, then the last five years.** The first asks whether the name ever appeared; the second, whether the relationship is current.

Reading a hit: from mention to entity

A hit is a string match, not an identification. Before a mention becomes a fact about your target, resolve it:

1. **Open the document at the cited passage.** Confirm whether the hit is in the form body or an exhibit, and record which.
2. **Extract the exact name as written,** with any entity suffix, state of organization and address the filing gives. Item 601(b)(21) lists jurisdiction for subsidiaries (17 CFR 229.601(b)(21)); press releases often give only a city.
3. **Match that name to a legal entity in the relevant state registry.** Unrelated companies in different states can share a name; see how to find the legal entity behind a brand name.
4. **Check the date of the filing against the date of the event.** An 8-K generally follows the event within four business days (Form 8-K); a 10-K narrative may describe a relationship that ended during the year.
5. **Classify the relationship:** acquired by, subsidiary of, customer of, supplier to, licensor, landlord, litigant, competitor named in risk factors. Each has a different implication for a screen.
6. **Record what the filing does not say.** Redacted pricing, an unnamed "privately held company," or a subsidiary list that omits insignificant subsidiaries are gaps, not answers.

Illustrative worked example (fictional). An analyst screening "Harbor Point Fire & Safety, Inc." runs `"Harbor Point Fire"` across all forms. Suppose it returns a 2019 10-K risk factor naming it as a regional competitor, and a 2024 8-K press-release exhibit announcing that a public building-services company "acquired Harbor Point Fire & Safety, a privately held provider." The analyst confirms the city and state match the target's registry record and records the 2024 exhibit as evidence the target is no longer independent. Status: disqualified, pending confirmation that the acquired and screened entities are the same legal person.

Fair access, rate limits and user agent

For scripted access, the SEC states a "current max request rate: 10 requests/second," asks users to "download only what you need," reserves the right to limit request rates, and says it "does not allow botnets or automated tools to crawl the site" (SEC, Accessing EDGAR Data). It also asks you to "declare your user agent in request headers" (Accessing EDGAR Data).

The SEC's sample declared header has two parts: your organisation's name and an administrative contact address for your domain (Accessing EDGAR Data). Use your firm's real name and a monitored role address, not a personal one, and keep it in configuration rather than hard-coded in shared notebooks.

For a research script: throttle below the ceiling and back off on errors, cache every response so reruns do not re-request documents, and fetch filings directly once you know the accession number. The SEC's documented programmatic interfaces are the data.sec.gov APIs for submissions and extracted XBRL data (webmaster FAQ); the full-text search FAQ describes a web interface, not an API.

For monitoring, the SEC offers no email alerts for EDGAR filings and points users to RSS feeds for some searches (webmaster FAQ).

Retaining filings as evidence

A search result page is not evidence. The filing is. Retain enough that a reviewer can reopen the exact document and find the exact passage without rerunning your search.

Evidence record template (one row per mention):

Field	Example (illustrative)
target_id	`T-0412`
name_as_written	`Harbor Point Fire & Safety`
filer_name and CIK	as shown on the filing index
form / file type	`8-K` / `EX-99.1`
accession_number	18-digit identifier from the filing URL
document_url	direct URL to the exhibit, not the search page
filing_date	`2024-xx-xx`
passage	verbatim sentence(s) containing the name
relationship_class	acquired_by / subsidiary_of / customer_of / supplier_to / other
query_used	exact query string, form filter and date range
retrieved_at	UTC timestamp
sha256	hash of the saved document bytes

Field	Example (illustrative)
entity_match_status	matched / probable / unresolved
reviewer	initials and date

The query string makes the search reproducible; the hash shows the document you read is the one you saved. The evidence standards page sets out why each answer needs a retained source and an excerpt rather than a summary.

Limits

- **Absence proves nothing.** No hit means no registrant wrote that string in an indexed filing. It does not mean the company is independent, has no public customers, or has never been approached.
- **Thresholds hide small deals.** Item 2.01's 10 percent test (Form 8-K) and Exhibit 21's significant-subsidiary omission (17 CFR 229.601(b)(21)(ii)) mean lower-middle-market targets bought by large filers are the least likely to be disclosed by name.
- **Coverage starts in 2001.** Older relationships require other archives (FAQ).
- **Form D searches match form fields, not descriptions.** Form D filings are indexed: a 2025-dated test for `"pooled investment fund"`, which is a Form D industry label, returned more than 10,000 Form D documents, while `"commercial landscaping"` restricted to Form D returned none. The first count is capped ("10,000 or more"), so narrow by form type and date before treating counts as meaningful. Search Form D by issuer name; see the Form D guide.
- **Redactions are legal.** Permitted omissions under Item 601(b)(10)(iv) (17 CFR 229.601) mean a filed contract can name a counterparty and hide everything else.
- **Rules change.** This guide reflects rule text as read on 2026-10-28; it is a research method, not legal advice, and disclosure questions belong with securities counsel.

Pre-search checklist

- [ ] Name variants listed: legal, short, DBA, former, brand
- [ ] Form types chosen per research question (table above), with an all-forms pass
- [ ] Date range set twice: all dates and recent
- [ ] Script throttled and user agent declared, if automated
- [ ] Evidence record fields ready before the first hit is opened
- [ ] "No hit" recorded as a search result with its query, not as a finding about the company

Docket's Scout agent applies the same rule to criteria such as "already acquired?": each typed answer quotes a retained page.

Source links

Links cited in this article, in order of first appearance. Full addresses are provided for readers using extracted text.

1. https://www.sec.gov/edgar/search/efts-faq.html

2. https://www.sec.gov/edgar/search
3. https://www.sec.gov/files/form8-k.pdf
4. https://www.law.cornell.edu/cfr/text/17/229.601
5. https://www.sec.gov/search-filings/edgar-search-assistance/accessing-edgar-data
6. https://www.sec.gov/about/webmaster-frequently-asked-questions

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About Docket

Docket provides deal-origination research software and managed research for private equity firms. We help investment teams investigate acquisition targets using structured screening criteria, retained sources and reviewable company evidence. Teams can work through a self-serve platform or use managed research, depending on how they want research delivered.

Research against a defined mandate

A useful target list needs more than company names. Docket focuses on the questions that determine whether a company fits an investment mandate, including the evidence needed to support or qualify each answer. Our research approach makes the connection between screening criteria, source material and conclusions visible to the team reviewing the work.

Triage, Scout and Audit

Docket's three named research agents perform complementary tasks. Triage resolves company identity and screens fit. Scout collects sourced answers against the mandate. Audit checks retained evidence, addresses contradictions and leaves unsupported answers visibly unresolved. This structure helps reviewers distinguish established findings from missing information and questions requiring further investigation.

Evidence that supports investment-team judgment

Our research library covers market mapping, screening criteria, private-company data, succession and ownership, source evaluation and evidence standards. These resources explain the methods and limitations behind origination research. Findings support a team's judgment; they do not establish that a company is for sale or guarantee a transaction or investment outcome.

Work with Docket

Visit Docket to explore the platform, managed research and the current contact path. Read about screening criteria, evidence standards, AI research agents and market mapping.

Public examples are illustrative unless explicitly identified otherwise. Research preparation and authorized outreach are separate activities; confidential target lists and customer outcomes should never be inferred from an educational example.

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