

How Do *You* “Find Solar”?

If you're looking to “Find Solar” then don't look where you used to. The ASES supported website at www.findsolar.com is not where you want to go if you are looking for where to buy a solar power system. For those that are not familiar with the situation, I will give a little background.

For many years, until right before the 2008 Solar Tour, ASES partnered with an existing company that provided a much needed *free* service to the solar community - a solar sizing estimator combined with a nationwide database of installers that were filtered by area. This resource was used by hundreds of thousands of people to estimate the solar system size they needed, get a ballpark price and a find a list of qualified installers that could make it happen.

Rather abruptly overnight ASES decided to break off from this company for various reasons and switch partnerships to an existing website company called CoolerPlanet.com that has a different business model. They were offering solar installers the opportunity to be listed in their directory and purchase solar leads for cash. Once the swap was made, the ASES printed material and website then re-directed people to the Cooler Planet website with their “findsolar.com” link. At this time the original company providing the service became www.Find-Solar.org.

From a solar installer perspective, ASES switching to Cooler Planet seemed to be a step in the wrong direction. Several years ago when Cooler Planet first surfaced as an independent “leads for sale” website our solar installation company looked into the scheme. It didn't take long to calculate that buying “leads” at \$119 a piece would not work. What we needed (and got) from the real Find Solar (find-solar.org) and other web listing sites was a place where we could list our company, experience, location, etc. and let the consumers contact us directly without paying a costly middle man. It would be even worse if a middle man operated a call center with no knowledge of our company, our capacity, or the ever-changing state tax credit rules and requirements is talking to our customers before us.

From a solar shoppers perspective what they don't know could hurt them. Solar shoppers that visit the CP website don't know that their name is being sold for \$119 to hungry dealers that are only “qualified” to receive them by paying CP. Since a CP dealer paid for their name they can probably expect some hard sell tactics coming soon since the dealer is already out of pocket. I bet solar shoppers might have second thoughts about turning over their info at this website if they knew this.

What about ASES dues paying members? From their perspective the ASES-CP relationship could be problematic. Their non-profit is directing solar shoppers to potentially bad experiences from an ASES referral. All legitimate solar dealers that do not bow down to the extortion tactics of CP can expect their name to be listed in a small soft gray font in a well below the paying “solar panel installers”.

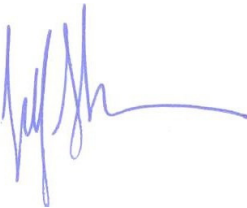
Using my zip code (70808) as an example I get two listings for Baton Rouge installers. One is a P.O. box in Shreveport, LA, (about 4 hours away) and a rural residence listing in Prairieville, both of which appearing to be part time solar installers. At the bottom of the page there is a section titled “Other installers in this area” and my Baton Rouge based company is listed there.

To see if there are any installers in Louisiana I clicked on the link next to “Baton Rouge” for Louisiana installers. Today I find 3 “featured” solar panel installers. These are Sunpower (an international company based in California) and the two previous listings. When I compare to the original Find Solar (www.Find-Solar.org) I find a much more comprehensive list of local full time dealers with their experience, credentials, testimonials, certifications, etc. It’s not just the listing. The middle man is eliminated and names are not being sold here.

Having the ASES give our Louisiana installers, solar shoppers, and ASES members this type of service is a more of a disservice. Our state chapter has promoted the original Find Solar on our website since the ASES swap last year and our members have reported that they are happy with this decision. After polling all the other state chapters, we found that we were not alone in our opinion. I understand that the annual chapter meeting was devoted to the topic but no action was taken.

As the director of our Louisiana chapter, I am asking all of you to help us in our plight to find a national solution to this situation because at the state level we are just redirecting everyone. While I realize that ASES will never be able to go back to the original Find Solar I am still looking for a workable alternative. Please feel free to contact me at my office in Baton Rouge at jeff@gulfsouthsolar.com or call me at 225-932-0035. Thank you for your support and I look forward to hearing your ideas.

Sincerely,



Jeff Shaw
Director, Louisiana Solar Energy Society
President, Gulf South Solar