

Reference USA

Reference USA is the online version of the American Business Disc. It contains a number of modules with detailed content on nearly 14 million businesses, over 115 million U.S. households, 732,000 physicians and other health care providers, 1.2 million Canadian businesses, and over 12 million Canadian residents. The information is obtained through five different modules: Business, Residential, Health Care, Canadian Business, and Canadian Residential. This review focuses only on the Business and Health Care modules, the two more likely to be used by community college students.

Information Database 3

InfoUSA, the company that produces Reference USA, has a staff of over 400 people. They go through the yellow pages and other directory listings published all around the United States and Canada, contact each business and health care provider to verify that they are still in existence, conduct a brief interview, and then provide more detailed information. For publicly traded companies, they also investigate and research SEC filings. Addresses are updated regularly through their use of the National Change of Address service. Each individual franchise, subsidiary or chain store is included in the database. Listings include not only name, address, phone number, 800 phone number (when available), and FAX number, but also estimated sales, the SIC and NAICS numbers, credit ratings, stock exchange and ticker symbol (when relevant), URL (to local store or franchise, if available), any parent companies (including foreign parent companies), store manager (when relevant), and any other significant names at that business location, and year the listing first appeared. Listings not only include businesses, but government agencies (blue pages are also included) and non-profit organizations.

The Health Care module not only includes name of physician or health care provider and address and phone number, but also age, group size, hospital affiliation, primary specialty, secondary specialty, gender, name of office manager, title, type of practice, if they are board certified, SIC category, state of license, medical school and year of education, prescriptions per week, patients per week, activities (hobbies), and patients' conditions per week (what their typical conditions tend to be characteristically). Listings include physicians, dentists, and other health care providers.

Search Interface 2

The interface includes a quick search form and custom search form, and the general menu includes context-sensitive help. The Quick Search form in the Business Module includes options that can be filled such as company name, city, state, and phone number. The Custom Search form in the Business Module includes search options such as Company Name, Executive Name, Ticker

Symbol, Major Industry, MSA, City, State, Number of Employees and more. When using Custom Search, users are asked to make selections that then lead to search forms to particular selections, where users can mix and match. The Custom Search process can sometimes turn into an overabundance of forms and options appearing on one screen, which could confuse a novice user. In general, it may be in the student's best interest to have Quick Search be the default form and in instruction, to encourage users to use no more than two, maybe three options when using Custom Search.

After the user fills in at least one box in the Quick Search form, or has filled in one box available from one of the options in the Custom Search form, the user is then led to a series of results. The results include company name, address, city/state, zip code, phone number, and then a selection called "up" and "down" where a user can find information on a parent company (going up) or a company's smaller subsidiaries (going down). A checkbox is available on the left if a user wants to get more information on one listing at once. A "Details" button" on the bottom allows the users to view all the selections, or the user can click on any of the business names, to look at the details of one listing. The details include a record spanning at least half a printed page long and are fairly easy to read. For some of the categories in the listing, the user can click on the category name to get a java script box giving a definition to the category name. For example, a click on "Estimated Sales" will give the user a clear definition what that term means. Similar links to definitions are available in the "Custom Search" options.

On the bottom of each record, there is an option to look at businesses within a number of miles of the local business and the user can also find similar companies by SIC categories. Using these options can allow users to find more readily local competitors, or in general, all businesses within a number of miles or even blocks of the original business found. When using the SIC category, the user is led to a screen to fill in SIC codes, with the directions "Enter up to 2-, 4- or 6-digit SIC codes in the boxes below." Fortunately, "SIC codes" appears as a link in that comment so the user can click on it to look up SIC codes for all sorts of industries.

Due to the proprietary nature of the database, Reference USA tends to limit users in retrieving so much information at one time. At the search results page, the user can only print and/or download a total of ten results. From time to time, as the user is navigating the database, the user may be asked to put in a code that is included on that page. If the user is navigating for a while, he or she may have to enter a code quite a number of times. E-Mail is not an option in this database. There is also a button on the search results page in green that says, "Purchase List," which provides the user a phone number for contacting Reference USA. In addition to this highlighted option in the center, search results pages have from left to right, "Print," "Download," "Revise My Criteria," "Purchase List," "New Search," and "Details."

The Health Source module has similar features. The Quick Search form includes physician first name, physician last name, dentist first name, dentist last name, office name, city, state, and phone. The Custom Search form contains options for most categories, some of which are physician gender, patients per week, office name, MSA, primary specialty, and medical school attended.

User Support Services 2

Help screens are abundant, and many links in Custom Search forms or detailed listings are available to look up definitions of terms. Sometimes, what is available in Custom Search is not available in detailed listings. For example, Custom Search includes a link to SIC to define what it is, a listing of them, and what they are for. The detailed listings that list SIC areas for the business do not have a link to provide such a definition. The help forms are usually written in a frequently asked questions format, and can include questions and step by step instructions for finding specific information in the database. There are no capture screens or online tutorials. In addition to a "Help" option in the navigation menu on the top right of the screen, the option is also available on the bottom of the screen along with an "About Us," "Contact Us," and a "Home" link. The "Contact Us" page leads to an Email form and a snail mail address, the only means of contact that are available.

Cost 1

For a campus that has a total of 6800 FTE, a non-consortium price is \$9088 for one of the databases. Reference USA offers a package of three: the Business, Residential, and Health Care databases, which at the same FTE would be \$19,631.00

Accessibility of Service 2

The main challenge in accessibility is the constant entering of code numbers. For computer novices and users in a rush, this feature is cumbersome. Otherwise, the connections and response time are adequate. Section 508 ADA Compliancy is not known at this time.

Overall Assessment 2

Reference USA is an excellent database for finding information about businesses at the local or national level, from local franchises or chain stores of larger companies, for its ability to compare businesses in a specific local area of any neighborhood in the United States, and for finding quickly credit ratings or other important ratings for both businesses and health care providers alike. The question here is how valuable this database can be for a community college library vs. a public library?

The Business Database would mainly be useful for classes or assignments that focus on small businesses or marketing, limiting the scope of how often the database would likely be used. With the names of managers, and some detailed information related to local businesses, the Business Database is also useful for students looking for employment. The Health Services database mainly seems to be useful for nursing, dental hygiene, and allied health students to find employment, otherwise this database functions more for the general public library user.

Overall, Reference USA would probably be most often used at community colleges more for career information than anything else. Typically at community colleges, career centers have their own categorical budget areas and more likely they would license such database products. While granted, not a consortia discount price, the cost also seems quite high for what community colleges can characteristically afford. Therefore, at this time, the consortium is not interested in providing this product to its colleges.