Gardner's Chemical Synonyms and Trade Names Electronic Handbook (CD-ROM)[1]

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Gardner's has long been a standard reference for questions involving trade and brand names of chemicals. Currently in its 10th print edition, this basic resource is now available in electronic form. As might be expected, the CD-ROM version provides greatly enhanced searching and retrieval of data. One can now search a combined "dictionary" index as well as specific indexes such as company, chemical name, CAS registry number, etc. Keyword searching with full boolean features is also available, and this Windows CD-ROM takes full advantage of the hypertext capabilities we are coming to expect in an electronic reference resource.

Installation is straightforward and was completed in about a minute on my 486 DX2-66 machine with 8 MB RAM. Minimum requirements are a 386SX machine runing under Windows 3.0 or 3.1 with no less than 27 MB of free hard disk space and 2 MB of RAM. But recommended system requirements are for a 386DX or better CPU, with 4MB RAM runing under Windows 3.1 or Windows NT with a mouse. Both Diskette and CD-ROM versions are available, but I tested the CD-ROM version which does require the standard Microsoft Extensions for CD-ROM drives. Retrieval was fairly fast on my double speed CD-ROM.

As noted in the user's guide introduction, this product is not a database in the conventional sense of the word but instead is still very much rooted in the concept of a book, enhanced by the power of computer hypertext indexing, searching, and browsing. The initial screen presents the user with an almost conventional table of contents that instructs the user to "turn to" a particular section and start browsing. At any point on the "pages" of this resource, underlined hypertext links can be clicked on for instant transfer to the pertinent section. Thus once a name is located, the company name can be clicked on to move you immediately to the section with the listing of company addresses.

The two basic searching modes are Index and Keyword. Index searching can be somewhat confusing at the beginning because of the page oriented display. Thus an index search for chloroform produces a listing of the "pages" where chloroform is referenced. These entries contain the heading for the page where the term chloroform appears one or more times. Since this heading is composed of the first and last items appearing on a page, your search term may not appear explicitly in this listing. Once you click on an item in the list, you are taken directly to the page and usually your item is at the head of a column on the two column page display, although it is not highlighted. You can then browse forward or backward from this display, click on CAS registry numbers or company names, or pursue other hits on your search list. Once you understand this display orientation, finding information is relatively straightforward, and moving from one page to the next on the list is easy. Indexes available include compound functionality class (e.g., deodorant, bleaching agent, etc.), CAS Registry Numbers, EINECS numbers, and numerous cross reference indexes such as the manufacturers old to new listing. All 13 indexes have full browsing features in case you are not sure what you are looking for.

Keyword searching is a little easier since, in contrast to the display of the index search, your search term is highlighted on the page display. As in the index search list it is easy to switch back and forth between the hit list and the display which is always positioned to display the first instance of the term found on the page. Since an entire page does not fit on the screen, at least not on my 15″ monitor, it is important to scroll down the entire page to insure that no instances are missed, something a new user might overlook. Boolean searching with truncation is fairly easy to do and online help with examples is available. Although there are some more advanced searching features available, they are probably overkill for the typical casual user.

These two very comprehensive ways to search for information give this product a robustnes that is very useful especially for new users, since there are many different paths to the same information. And keyword searching in particular allows one to search for information in a manner that is impossible in the print. Thus for example, a search on the term Germany restricted to the manufacturers directory produced 75 hits. Additional features include the ability to define bookmarks, a "history" list of all previous page displays, a saved list of the last ten keyword searches, Forward and Back Buttons, and instant access to the list of abbreviations. Printing is available, but only at the page or more level, a bit of a bother if a user only wants a line or two from a page. Transfer to and from the Windows clipboard and annotation is also available.

All in all, I find this electronic reference tool to be an intriging and thorough implementation of the print version, and its electronic price of $250 compares favorably with $195 for the print edition. Aside from my initial confusion in locating index hits it is relatively easy to use. Still, given its complexity, in a library setting, many users will require some help in using the resource effectively. The accompanying manual is detailed enough to serve as a backup to personal assistance in most cases.

REFERENCES AND NOTES

(1) Gardner's Chemical Synonyms and Trade Names Electronic Handbook. Michael and Irene Ash. Gower, Old Post Road, Brookfield, VT 05036, USA, (802)-276-3162 or Gower House, Croft Road, Aldershot, Hants, England (0252)-331551 (1994).

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