STN Express: Review

Jayashri Nagaraja†

Department of Chemistry, Princeton University, Princeton, New Jersey 08544

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STN Express is a front-end software package, produced by the American Chemical Society, designed to facilitate online searching on STN and Questel. This software package helps users to perform online searches in the scientific, business, health, and safety databases. It also enables the user to search structure files without really having to learn complex structure building commands. STN Express also provides an automated logon feature, an editor, and the capability to import structures from selected programs and process them as queries. In short, STN Express does most of what is required to make online searching an easier process.

STN Express is available for both Macintoshes and IBM compatibles with Windows. This review, however, is limited to the Windows version. The minimum requirements for installing STN Express for Windows are the 3.0 version of Microsoft Windows, with a mouse and an EGA or higher resolution monitor compatible to the program, 1 megabyte or more of memory, 1 double sided floppy disk drive (3.5 in. or 5.25 in.), a hard disk with at least 2 megabytes of available disk space (after Windows is installed), a modem (Hayes or compatible, or manual dial), and an IBM compatible PC with a 80286 processor. However, a PC with 80386 works much better with both Windows and STN Express.

The program comes in three 3.5-in. disks (5.25-in. disks are also available) and is easy to install both from in DOS and from within Windows. The program also comes with a good manual. The degree of difficulty in installing varies when it comes to networks, but customer support service from STN International is good enough to overcome any major problems.

This newer version of STN Express has several notable enhancements. The display has been improved, allowing customization with colors and dots or angled carbon atoms. The output can be edited, and the margins and spacing can be customized as well. The result is a good looking output.

The new preview option shows a miniature version of the structure while files or templates are selected. For instance, if you wanted to work on a particular structure but had forgotten the name of the file it was in, you could use this feature to preview the structure in each file in order to locate the file that you need.

Templates of the more common structures are also available with the preview feature. The figures in the templates can be copied and modified or combined with other structures. Using the templates to build or modify structures saves time and leaves less room for errors.

Other new features include a periodic table now available under the utilities menu. This makes including elements in structures a whole lot easier. It is also useful as a quick reference. A good enhancement to this would be to expand this feature in such a way as to make the usage of screens invisible to the user.

An option to exclude specific elements or certain groups of elements, such as halogens or metals, is now available. However, this feature has its limitations. For instance, you cannot easily exclude more than one atom at a node. You have to go through a long and convoluted process to achieve this. Halogens and metals are the only groups of elements that you can exclude in a straightforward manner. You also cannot create your own group of elements to exclude.

The most significant enhancement is in communications. STN Express now has new capabilities that allow communication via a variety of network environments to STN and other online hosts. However, in order to access STN via the internet (which needs TCP/IP support in most cases), you will need version 3.11 of STN Express for Windows. STN International is willing to provide a no-charge upgrade to licensed users of 3.10. The Macintosh version needs the Macintosh communication toolbox to provide internet access.

Another feature worth mentioning is the query verification. This feature helps you to check your structure before going online. It is a little time-consuming. However, the savings in cost may be well worth the time spent in query verification. People are more likely to get into the habit of query verification if there is a shorter version. This is especially true in an academic scenario where more training takes place, but where the cost benefits do not clearly outweigh the savings in time.

Other features include the option of capturing from the beginning of the scroll buffer. If you had forgotten to turn on the capture feature and had realized your mistake after printing a few citations, you could still save those depending on the size of your buffer, by clicking on the retrospective save box. Guided search is still cumbersome to use, in my view, and it seems much easier to learn a few commands instead of trying to dredge through the different menus.

On the whole, STN Express is a good software program and is one of the better structure searching programs available. Since the software package is written in close collaboration with the host, it has certain advantages such as anticipation of any alteration in the host's command language, scrolling graphics, query formulation, and verification specific to a host. Also the hardware and software support is given at the same place, and that adds quite a bit of value to the software. STN Express is worth its price for those who do structure searching with any regularity.

REFERENCES AND NOTES

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† Present address: Head of Circulation Division, Main Library, Princeton University, Princeton, NJ 08544.