

Finding what you need on the internet

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Finding what you need on the internet: Two valuable resources

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If you think that this will be yet another discussion about Yahoo, or one of the other large general purpose search engines, read on. This article covers one of the many industry- or profession-specific search systems available on the internet. Getting familiar with these more specialized search systems will save you considerable time and frustration.

Most of us who have worked in and around manufacturing facilities have come to depend on the bulky green volumes known as the Thomas Register, or more correctly, The Thomas Register of American Manufacturers SM. These tomes may occupy considerable real estate either in your office, your company's library or somewhere in purchasing. The people at Thomas Register have done two things recently that are of considerable help to those of us who have come to rely on this reference: the first are Thomas Register CD-ROMs, and the second is the Thomas Register web site. This article will address the latter, as well as a Thomas Register partner, the Thomas Regional web site.

One can get at the Thomas Register web site at www.Thomasregister.com. The first time user must register to use it, but registration is free. The Thomas Register web site offers several distinct advantages over the traditional printed version. The first few advantages are obvious and not really exciting. One is simply real estate. Finding a place to store (much less use) the bound versions of the register is difficult. If you have access to the internet, you have access to the register. The second big advantage is, in theory, how current the information is. One would assume that an electronic version would be updated more often than volumes you have sitting on your bookshelf. The improvement in storage space is met with the CD-ROM version as well.

Once registered, you can move directly to the search portion of the site, where you are allowed to search on a company name, product or service, or brand name. Selecting one of these three categories and entering the appropriate key word or words, the register quickly returns a set of broad categories. For example, searching under the word "extrusion" under products/services yielded 157 product headings. Obviously this contains a significant number of categories that are not appropriate for plastics extrusion, but serves as an example. Each product heading is reported along with a set of columns recording the number of companies found, (and now the bigger and very exciting advantages of the web site) the number of companies with on- line catalogues, the number of companies with literature requests via fax, and the number of companies with on-line ordering and links to web sites.

Selecting one of the broad product headings gets one into the listings of the individual companies themselves, where, if available, one can jump to an on-line catalogue, on-line ordering, or move to the company's web site. If none of these features are available, there is a short blurb about the company, location, phone numbers, and what type of products they offer, very similar to the "bare-bones" listing in the bound versions of the register. The designers of the Thomas web site have done an excellent job in that they split the screen when you jump to a company web site. The left hand side of the screen gives you the Thomas Register choices of contacting the company, etc. while the right hand side is the site of the individual company.

On the minus side, it was noted that many links to company web sites were not available. For example both LNP Engineering Plastics and Dow Corning have fine web sites, but these links are not active in the Thomas Registry. While this may be either a cost issue or simply trying to get all the links updated, it was disappointing to see known sites not represented.

As with any conventional desk reference, the primary means of contact with the bound versions of the Thomas Register is the telephone. With the web site, to be able to go from a search for a list of suppliers of a given item or service (either nationally or by state) to order from an on-line catalogue is a huge advantage and one would suspect, an advantage for a company that offers that option. A cursory stroll through a few randomly chosen categories shows that not everyone is offering on-line catalogues and on-line ordering. Look for these services to grow considerably as more and more people begin to rely on the internet for goods and services.

Thomas Regional Directory Company has been in business since 1977, and publishes 19 Regional Industrial Buying Guides, in print and on CD-ROM, and now on a web site (www.thomasregional.com). The Thomas Regional Directory is listed as a "partner" to the Thomas Register

Thomas Regional provides access to a searchable database of more than 480,000 manufacturers, distributors and service companies organized under 4,500 product/service categories in 19 key U.S. industrial markets. As with the Thomas register, one can search by product/service or company name in the region of interest to you. As Thomas Regional points out in their own introduction

"You can also refine your search based on company type (manufacturer, distributor, manufacturer's rep and service company), geographic location (state, city/county, area code), trade name, key words and other specifications such as ISO 9000-certified, and minority and woman owned businesses. View supplier brochures, catalogs, line cards and fax forms and contact suppliers directly via our Contact Company feature."

A search of the word extrusion turned up 159 companies in the Greater Delaware Valley region. While there are no direct links to company web sites, there are in some cases links to something called a line card. A line card is a one or two page "baby" web page with details about products, contacts, etc. It would appear to be space owned and operated by Thomas Regional and sold as advertising space to individual companies.

Thomas Regional also offers listings (again by region) of trade shows and special events, including locations, dates, contacts, listings of industry and professional organizations, and government and business resources. Where available, each reference has a link to the web site of the organization in question. The listings of industrial and professional organizations is rather incomplete, missing such notables as SPE and SPI.

Thomas Regional will begin offering some new features that capitalize on their database of companies. As Thomas Regional points out in a press release published on their web site, industrial buyers today face the same recurring problems with the large search engines that researchers, consumers, and virtually everyone else has: these searches generally produce hits in the range of thousands to millions, with far too little of it on target. For that reason, Thomas Regional will be creating a series of web sites that provide buyers with "vertical portals" to specific industries. These portals

"provide access to Thomas Regional's extensive databases of industrial suppliers, organized according to industry or trade. Thomas Regional is leveraging the usefulness of its content through comprehensive databases that fulfill the specific need of each industry".

Thomas Regional claims that ultimately over 90 industrial "communities" will have their own Thomas-powered web sites tailored to their interests, which will go a long way to improve the efficiency and speed of their searches. The first of these vertical web sites has been launched for the facilities management and engineering profession and may be found at www.facilitiesengineering.com.

- Rob Jerman

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