

Consumer Information on the Web: A Hands-On Tutorial for SCLS Librarians and Their Patrons

Note to users – instructions to the librarians are given in square brackets and [underlined] Links in the .pdf are blue but they are not really working links.

We all know that the ease of publishing on the Web has made it the soapbox for disgruntled opinions of all kinds. How, then, is a consumer to find reputable product information? This is a problem all year long, but becomes especially pronounced during the holiday season, when buyers do not want to unknowingly purchase unsafe products, and give them to family and friends as gifts.

One answer to this dilemma is to turn to known organizations, often governmental agencies that have been in the business of providing consumer information since before the Internet, and have carried over their services into the digital age. There are also a number of reputable web-based services that we have all come to rely on. To make this process of finding good consumer information on the web even easier for you, librarians here at your library have selected a number of high quality sites. We have also taken all of these sites for a “test-drive” to determine just what types of information each one has to offer. We have created this workshop to give you a chance to do your own test-drive, and see the nature of the information available at these sites, so you can plan for how you might use them in the future.

We will look at a several types of sites today:

- 1) Directory, kind of jumping off place sites
- 2) Sites with lists of unsafe or recalled products
- 3) Sites with health and safety information about the use of various products, particularly food and drugs
- 4) Price comparison sites, with information about online shopping safety, and online merchant ratings

Directories:

Google Directory Consumer Information

Google, the much-beloved search engine, also has a categorized, or directory section, called Google Directory, which includes a Consumer Information section. Sites in the Google Directory are selected by Open Directory editors (a large, public web directory, managed by Netscape, kind of web organization by the people for the people, see <http://dmoz.org/>). Web sites selected by Open Directory editors are organized into a number of broad categories, with many more specific subcategories. Google uses the Open Directory hierarchy as the basis for its directory. Google also uses its PageRank technology, a count of how many sites link to a particular site, to rank the sites in the directory for display. When you select one of the directory categories, sites listed are displayed with a green bar to the left, indicating their importance. This means that in the Google Directory, like many search displays, the items on the top **might** be more appropriate than those lower down in the list.

When you go into the Google Consumer Information Directory, there is some information at the top level, and the rest is categorized into various sub-categories, such as: Advocacy and Protection(280), Automobiles(1079), Complaints(107), Computers and Internet(592), Electronics(433), Toys and Games(114), etc. The numbers in parentheses indicate how many sites are in each category. The sites in the sub-categories get pretty specific, for example under Advocacy and Protection, there is a site devoted to reports of Theme Park accidents. Under “Complaints”, the sites listed can be pretty opinionated; for example, there is a site called: American Airlines Suck, (<http://www.aasucks.org/>) and another supposedly on poor customer service, but primarily about one person’s gripe about Starbucks, called “Starbucked” (<http://www.starbucked.com/>)

Some of the sites we will look at today are listed in the Google Directory, and there are many more there for you to explore on your own.

FirstGov for Consumers

Is a gateway to government information for consumers. An easy way to get around in this massive site is to use the icons provided at the top to go to more specific areas, such as Food or Product Safety. Each of these more specific areas has a left column of classified links [under product safety, see automobiles, children, cosmetic, household, etc.] and a right hand column of longer articles called *In the Spotlight*. FirstGov for consumers also links to the:

Consumer Action

Consumer Action is a non-profit organization that began in San Francisco in 1971. The information provided by Consumer Action is similar to the other sites we have seen, but their unique feature is materials in other languages, including Chinese, Korean, Russian, Spanish, and Vietnamese. At the web site, links along the left lead to specific categories of information, such as cars or credit cards. The set-up to get these items in other languages is pretty slick – first, select Multilingual Materials from the horizontal menu, and then select the language you want. Materials in non-Western alphabets are available in .pdf only, but Spanish language materials can be displayed on the Web.

Federal Citizen Information Center, FCIC

Which you may recall as a source to order printed brochures with information on all kinds of consumer topics. Today, most of that information is available online at this web site. The FCIC publishes the Consumer Action Website, which includes the Consumer Action Handbook, that tells you where and how to complain about faulty consumer products. There are sections with information on how to be a good holiday shopper, and how to make informed health care choices. The FCIC site also includes a large Recalls area with lists of recently recalled products, organized into the following topics: [\[browse Children's Product or Food Products to see some typical recalls\]](#)

Automotive

Children's Product

Consumer Products

Food Products

Health Products

Plant and Animal Products

Most of these recall notices include pictures of the product, so when you are told that a particular stuffed bear is recalled, you can see a picture of the bear.

Product recalls, product safety

Product recalls may be issued by a variety of agencies, for example, food might be recalled by the US Dept. of Agriculture, or health products by the Food & Drug Administration. Automotive recalls are often issued by the manufacturer, but may be reported by a federal agency like the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration. The value of a site like the FCIC is that it provides recall announcements from a variety of places, as well other more general information. Sometimes, though, you may want to go to a particular site that focuses on recalls, sometimes possibly for one specific category of consumer goods.

US Consumer Product Safety Commission

Many of the product recalls that you see on the other sites we have looked at are issued by the US Consumer Product Safety Commission, or CPSC. At the CPSC site, you can click left hand links to see recent recalls, or choose the recall section to browse recalls by date. There are some search links (Find by product type, company or product description) but what really works best is the General recall categories (toys, children's products, etc.) link – [suggest trying out this link to see specific recalls; the site suggests using your browser's "find in page" function

to find specific terms once you enter a category.] Again, these include pictures. At the CPSC, you can also sign up to receive recall bulletins and other information via email from CPSC (<http://list.cpsc.gov/> for the form) There is also a section on filing complaints (<http://cpsc.gov/talk.html>). There are some product areas where, although CPSC publishes recalls, they cannot accept complaints. For these cases, where a complaint must be filed with another agency than CPSC, a link is provided (e.g. Automotive complaints go to the National Highway Traffic Safety Association, <http://www.nhtsa.dot.gov/cars/problems/ivoq/default.htm>)

National Highway Traffic Safety Administration

This is the site to turn to for automotive recalls and safety information. There is information about how to use child car seats, as well a guide for buying car seats, and child seat recalls, going back to 1991 [follow Recalls link from homepage to show these sections; also Press Releases]

Consumer Reports

While Consumer Reports is primarily available by subscription, there is a lot of free information on their web site. The current issue is available, but if the product you want to buy is not reviewed in the current month, that's not very helpful! There is a Holiday Giving Guide, with lots of tips on safe shopping, and there is a section with advice on how to select certain products, like what features to look for in CD-headphones or microwaves, but the actual brand comparisons with ratings that you see in the magazine are subscription only.

SafetyAlerts.com

A commercial operation that compiles recall and safety warning information from a variety of sources (many from the CPSC). Try choosing any of the categories to see the types of information. There is also an archive of longer safety articles, on topics such as how to cook a holiday turkey, and also a sign-up for an email alert service.

Food and Health

Center for Science in the Public Interest (CSPI)

All of the sites that we have already seen do contain a good deal of information about recalled foods. CSPI is a non-profit organization in Washington DC, with a goal of making scientific information about food and health available to consumers, in a form they can understand. They produce a number of publications such as the *Nutrition Action Healthletter*, large portions of which are available online (<http://www.cspinet.org/nah/index.htm>) and have some ongoing campaigns such as lobbying Congress to tax junk food:

<http://www.cspinet.org/reports/tax/>

and getting information about on the possible danger of Olestra, Proctor & Gambles non-fat fat:

<http://www.cspinet.org/olestra/>

[Show Newsroom section; try one of the links like Save Harry (save Harry Potter from being sponsored by Coca Cola)

<http://www.cspinet.org/new/200210241.html> as an example of Acrylamide In Food <http://www.cspinet.org/new/200206271.html>]

CSPInot

Does everyone agree with CSPI? No, CSPInot is a site created by the Center for Consumer Freedom, a coalition of more than 30,000 restaurant and tavern operators who are “working together to protect the public's right to a full menu of dining and entertainment choices.” They contend that CSPI uses junk science and scare tactics to prevent consumers from enjoying eating and drinking. The information on their site is presented in the form of debate points, arguing against information given in CSPI press releases. [You could show their Acrylamide information to contrast with CSPI]

www.FoodSafety.gov - Gateway to Government Food Safety Information

Site description “FoodSafety.gov is a gateway website that provides links to selected government food safety-related information. Not every government web site is listed. When more than one government web site provides similar information, links will be provided to only one or two of those sites.” [some useful sections: Food Safety News from other agencies: Centers for Disease Control CDC, Food Safety & Inspection service, and Food & drug Admin; EPA did not have much; search and site index; try listeria in search]

Price comparison sites and online shopping

Most of know the frustration of buying an item from a catalog, thinking we got either something very unique, or at a better price than in a brick-and-mortar

store, only to find that a retail outlet a short drive away has the same product, and you could have it without paying shipping! Also, although many of us indulge heavily in online shopping, we still worry about the trustworthiness of online merchants we never meet, and fear credit card theft. These price comparison sites are designed to help consumers find products at reasonable prices, and also find reviews of online merchants.

My Simon

BizRate.com

DealTime

MySimon, BizRate, and DealTime are all pretty similar - you can enter a product type, or brand name and find retailers carrying it at various prices. You can also browse by broad categories, such as Apparel and computers. If you do a general search [try digital cameras; for brand name try is Emile Henry, a brand of cookware] the BizRate display, ranked by top sellers, might be a little easier to use. The information about merchants seems a little easier to get to. At all three sites, you can sort your list by merchant or price. In BizRate, merchants are rated by customers (☺ =would shop here again.) [have attendees try out the same search at all three sites, to see which one they like best] All three sites have featured products, special offers, and best sellers. MySimon has a staff pick, BizRate has a guide to stores, and DealTime has a top 10 list.

National Consumer League

The oldest consumer organization in the country (founded 1899) the mission of the National Consumer League is to protect the interests of consumers and workers. Some things you might find especially helpful at this site are:

- 1) Shopping Online-a section of the NCL website with advice on online shopping, including 6 handy tips on one page

(<http://www.nclnet.org/shoppingonline/shoppingtips.htm>) There are also Internet Fraud statistics, and a 2001 Online Shopping Survey (<http://www.nclnet.org/shoppingonline/shoppingsurvey.htm>)