

frntends.txt

FRONTENDS, GATEWAYS, USER FRIENDLY SYSTEMS,  
OR WHATEVER YOU WANT TO CALL THEM

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A variety of products available on the market attempt to make database searching more user friendly. Some products are designed to facilitate database searching; they help with the technique (telecommunications, command entry, up- and downloading) but not the art of database searching (search strategy development.) Other products are designed to do both. Both endusers and especially search intermediaries may wish to familiarize themselves with these products; they can offer cost savings, ease of use, or efficiency. Search intermediaries need to know what is generally available on the market for their own benefit and for the benefit of their clientele. Advising a potential enduser searcher or deciding what enduser search service to offer inhouse requires familiarity with these products' general features and how they compare.

The variety and types of user friendly database searching products can confuse endusers and search intermediaries. Names used to describe these products include user friendly system, frontend software or system, gateway software or system, search aid software, etc. The characteristics of many of these products overlap and makes categorizing and naming them awkward. This segment of the information industry is active and volatile; dedicated industry watchers scramble to keep up with new product announcements, news releases, gossip, and obituaries. Products come, go, evolve, or change names. Like the Balkan States these products follow separate paths of development and show marked differences in their approaches to making database searching more user friendly.

Generally characterized as offering a user friendly interface for the experienced or inexperienced database searcher, these products can be grouped into three categories for the purposes of classification: mainframe-based user friendly

frntends.txt

system, microcomputer-based frontend software, and gateway system. The authors assign names for product classification purposes and are not nomenclature authorities. We classify a simplifying software interface used between the database searcher and the database being searched as a "frontend"; its intent is to make database searching more user friendly and/or more efficient. We classify a frontend mounted on a database service's mainframe computer as a "mainframe-based user friendly system." A frontend mounted locally on the database searcher's microcomputer is classified as a "microcomputer-based frontend software"; these have also been called gateway software or search aid software. A remote mainframe computer with its own frontend which provides a simplifying conduit for the database searcher to access many different database services is classified as a "gateway system". The gateway system's frontend software standardizes the searching process in order to facilitate searching several database services and their databases. Feel free to make up your own names for these product categories; most people do!

A company's longevity and staying power are primary concerns when considering a product; will the company be there tomorrow answering your questions and supporting your product with updates or system changes? Pay attention to its provisions for and frequency of updating. Mainframe-based systems and gateway systems obviously do any required updating on their own; this aspect should not be ignored when comparing them to "gee whiz, look at them windows" microcomputer software. Microcomputer-based frontend software becomes obsolescent without updating; the database services change features and reload databases regularly e.g. the Dialog2 changeover. Microcomputer-based frontend software requires your initiative and expense to update and your faith that the company will exist when future updates are needed. One exception for the atheists out there is PC Netlink which supports updating by the searcher.

What level of support and documentation is offered for the product? The existence of a product newsletter indicates strong support by a company. What are the hours of the trouble desk, especially if you're a west coast person trying to reach an east coast company? Are there help or tutorial features available in the software or online? Exceptional examples include Paperchase which informs the Medline searcher of the appropriate controlled vocabulary, and ProSearch which informs the searcher of the appropriate database-specific field suffixes and prefixes. Few products

frntends.txt

offer such database-specific advice. Several products offer instructional advice on the product or on the database service(s) e.g. PC Netlink, Searchworks, Dialoglink, SciMate Searcher, Search Helper, ProSearch, EasyNet, BRKTHRU, Colleague, After Dark. Database selection assistance is supported on several products. EasyNet, a gateway system, routes your search strategy transparently to a particular database service and database after asking for your subject field. Other products assist in database selection through database directories e.g. ProSearch, PC Netlink, Searchware, BRKTHRU, Colleague, After Dark.

All three types of user friendly searching products offer advantages for certain applications. Regarding them as offering a universal panacea is unfair; it's obvious that they are not designed as ultimate solutions for the intricacies of database searching. However they offer solutions for many needs; try to see if your needs or your clientele's needs are well served. For example interlibrary loan assistants need to do simple bibliographic verification; wouldn't a product that simplifies searching for them be attractive? Product selection depends on one's subject area and databases of interest; it also depends on one's expected frequency of searching. Menu-driven search systems may attract infrequent searchers who will not get a knowledge of commands reinforced through continual use. Similarly a common menu or command system to access two or more database services simplifies searching greatly e.g. SciMate Searcher, ProSearch, and EasyNet. The capability to upload complex search strategies and the capability to type-ahead of command processing offers some cost savings to most searchers. The post-searching capabilities of some microcomputer-based frontend software inflame the searching passions; "post searching capability" refers to the product's ability to edit and/or manipulate your search results. Some micro-based frontend software can edit your downloaded search results. ProSearch and Dialoglink edit your search results line by line; with this feature you do not have to copy your downloaded file into your word processing software in order to edit it. As an extra refinement, Searchworks can delete whole records rather than doing line-by-line deletions. Want to download and easily import search results into a local database? Searchworks has a reformatting option for database record field labels; ProSearch and SciMate Searcher can be bundled with their companies' file management software to import your results directly into a database. For example Personal Bibliographic Software offers a bundled package called the Searcher's Tool Kit comprised of ProSearch,

frntends.txt

BiblioLinks, and ProCite; together these can download, reformat, and import your search results into a local database. Integration eliminates the need to create a link between several software packages in order to download, reformat, and import search results into a database.

Be sure to try out products in advance; ask for demo passwords or obtain demo disks. Try to see it before purchase; you won't be disappointed if you get some hands-on time first. Maybe round up a manual first; if you can actually read through a product's documentation, then there is a good chance that the product can be mastered. Ask a company for customers in your area. Hang around exhibit booths at meetings. Try the "menu" option on BRS' regular daytime service to get an idea of one product's approach. Be aware of the learning time required for certain products; micro-based frontend software requires a time investment to master. Be thorough in your decision process; try to gather more information than what one finds in marketing literature and press releases. Ask yourself if you really need it!

The following matrix compares general features of a selection of these products; the information presented was gathered from vendor representatives, manuals, software, or market literature. To the best of the authors' knowledge it is up-to-date as of May 11, 1986. Several products are left out including MicroCambridge (a micro-based frontend software), several products developed for non-North American markets or database services, and others. The matrix evolved from a handout developed for the Southern California Online Users Group workshop on "Gateways/Search Aids" held on April 9, 1986. The authors thank Julie Inouye for her tireless wordprocessing on the comparison matrix, and Lucille Martin for her experienced wordprocessing advice.

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