

## Thomas Register

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## **Thomas Register**

### INTRODUCTION

The Thomas Register of American Manufacturers is an industrial directory published since 1905 by Thomas Publishing. Thomas Publishing began its 100-year publishing career in 1898 with the American Grocery Trades Reference Book, predecessor of the current Thomas Food Industry Register. In the company's words, this marks "one hundred years of bringing buyers and sellers together"<sup>1</sup>—a perfect description of Thomas' historical role as the leading provider of directories for industrial buying needs. Thomas also publishes the Thomas Register of European Manufacturers, the American Export Register, and numerous guides for specific industries and regions.

Along with expanding its range of products, Thomas Publishing has continuously adapted the Thomas Register to new information technology, offering DIALOG access beginning in 1984, a CD-ROM version in 1993, and World Wide Web access in 1995. This review evaluates the Web version of the Thomas Register of American Manufacturers in comparison with the print version and with other industrial directories on the Web. The CD-ROM has essentially the same features as the print directory, and is not considered here.

### MISSION AND INTENDED AUDIENCE

The Thomas Register serves as a national yellow pages for industrial companies, allowing buyers to easily find companies that manufacture and distribute the products they need. According to Thomas, the Register is used more than all other industrial buying guides combined. As one of the largest directories of industrial companies, it can also be used to identify the size and scope of various branches of industry, or as a source of basic information for individual companies. Purchasing agents for industrial companies and small businesses are the primary intended audience, but marketers, researchers, and librarians will find the information useful as well.

### CRITERIA FOR INCLUSION OF INFORMATION

Companies wishing to place a listing in the Thomas Register submit a request for placement. Basic listing is free, but companies must pay for extended listings that include product catalogs,

links to corporate Web pages, and other features. The Thomas Register Editorial Department reviews all listing requests and evaluates them according to “standards and criteria that are proprietary and which are not disclosed.” While the print and CD-ROM versions are updated annually, the Internet site appears to be updated continuously. However, “the process of verifying, editing, and uploading listings that are accepted for publication can take up to six months.” Thomas lists both American and Canadian companies.

The process results in a directory of over 155,000 industrial suppliers and 124,000 brand names, which are classified under 60,000 product headings by Thomas’ editorial staff. Approximately 5,500 product catalogs are available online (or in CD-ROM form), compared to 2,600 in the print version of Thomas.

## REGISTRATION

Use of the Thomas Register on the Internet requires registration, which is free. After answering a few survey questions and entering identifying information such as your name, address, company, phone, and e-mail, you can choose a user name and password to access the site. Thomas promises not to resell your personal information to anyone outside the company, and you can also elect not to receive e-mail from Thomas. The registration information is used to create automatic e-mail and fax requests to companies when you select these options from within Thomas.

Other Thomas Internet sites such as the Thomas Register of European Manufacturers require separate registration. While basic registration and log-in is convenient, it is unfortunate that a one-time registration cannot be used to access all Thomas databases.

## SUMMARY OF HOME PAGE INFORMATION

Those familiar with the 34-volume set of the Thomas Register in print will find much the same information in Thomas on the Internet. The opening screen offers a description of the database, answers to FAQs, and links to other Thomas Publishing products. At this point, most users will choose to log in and access the basic “Search A to Z.” This page allows searching by company name, brand name, or product heading. No browsing of the database is possible. Each search yields a list of matching results. When searching by company name or brand name, this list displays companies. When searching by product heading, all partially matching product headings are shown. Clicking on a specific product heading then brings up company-level information. For each company, basic directory information is provided, as well as a listing of the products and services the company offers. However, the company’s number of employees, asset rating

classification, and names of key personnel are only available via the print or CD-ROM versions of Thomas.

For some companies, further links are provided, allowing the user to automatically generate a request for product literature by fax or by mail. A sample catalog requested by the author arrived within a few business days by mail. Also, selected product catalogs are available online. These are very similar in format to those found in the print version, but with more use of color. Thomas Register has links to over 1,000 Web sites of participating Thomas Register advertisers, and a select number of companies offer online ordering through Thomas' TPN service. TPN allows the creation of online requests for quotes (RFQs) or purchase orders, with full price information. TPN issues a stern warning that browsers below Netscape Navigator 4 and Internet Explorer 4 will cause problems in the display of information.

Thomas has designed its site in a "proprietary" way. Links to Web pages are framed and the original home page addresses are hard to unearth without using the browser's features to display page information. Also, the automated e-mail feature is routed through Thomas' server. The actual e-mail address being contacted is buried in the extended URL that Thomas uses to route to the e-mail, and is not always clearly visible. It would be more convenient if this information were presented in a more direct fashion. While there may be sound reasons for this technique, the Web has accustomed us to more transparent links to resources. In some cases, Thomas appears to be providing the server space for the Web pages it presents, allowing some companies an Internet presence where previously none existed.

## MECHANICS OF SEARCH

Basic searching is straightforward but inflexible. All searches originate in the choice of one of the three categories of company name, brand name, or product heading. It is not possible, for example, to search company names and brand names simultaneously. Only after bringing up a list of companies is it possible to modify the search by limiting to companies based in a particular state, or searching only for companies whose descriptions contain certain keywords.

This can be a major disadvantage when searching a widely used product heading such as "Diesel," which will bring up headings like "Diesel Engine Parts"; "Diesel Engines"; "Engines: Diesel, Locomotive," and so on. It would be useful to search the entire class of product headings containing "Diesel" for additional keywords, rather than having to select one at a time. For this kind of unfocused search, leafing through printed pages may actually be faster. According to Thomas, manufacturing companies can be distinguished from distributing companies by typing "manufacturing" as a limiting keyword.

Searches sometimes reveal strange inconsistencies. For example, typing "turbo" to limit a search on "Engines: Diesel" will give 3 manufacturers of turbochargers for diesels. Limiting by

“turbochargers” gives the same result. Typing “turbocharger” yields just one company. Two entirely different companies are listed under the product heading “Turbochargers: Diesel.” These quirks are also to be found in the print Thomas Register, but the power of online searching tends to turn them up more frequently.

While Thomas supports Boolean searching, in some cases this also produces anomalous results. For example, a product heading search for “Fish” yielded 78 hits, while typing “Fish or Fishes” gave only 66. The Boolean “and” appears to link single words only; if two phrases are used, only the first is searched. Other frustrations include a lack of cross-referencing of product headings, and the inability to search by SIC codes.

Fortunately, help is available both through the FAQs, and a “Can’t Find It?” button that links to a page where you can e-mail for search assistance to an apparently live search assistant, who will search for specific company information and e-mail, fax, or mail results to you. However, this button is only available on the final pages of the search sequence. Contextual search help should be available throughout the process.

Search results are clearly presented, but sometimes a company’s Web links are to an internal part of their home page that obscures the entire company’s range of business. For example, Thomas’ listing for Kyocera links directly to Kyocera’s page on Industrial Ceramic Parts & Engine Components. But Kyocera’s Web site also includes other subsidiaries that produce solar power equipment, other varieties of ceramic products, and Contax and Yashica cameras. In addition, Kyocera America is not listed by Thomas as having a Web link, but Kyocera America’s Web pages are easily found through the Kyocera Web site. Thomas’ search system does, however, deliver quick and easily interpretable results within its limits.

## AUTHORITY OF PUBLISHER/CURRENCY AND STABILITY OF INFORMATION

According to Thomas, “more companies advertise in Thomas Register than in all other industrial publications combined.” Thomas Register’s historic role as the leading guide for industrial buyers ensures that its information is as reliable as possible, given the nature of the publication. It is highly likely that Thomas will continue to serve this role in print and online. Backed by the ongoing publication of the print and CD-ROM version, it is more likely to be up-to-date and well-maintained than the average Web site that may be launched in a flurry of enthusiasm but then languishes for lack of interest.

## SPEED OF PAGE LOADING

Thomas Register loaded quickly and consistently on both LAN and modem connections. It is well designed for this purpose, having minimal animation and other frills on the page. However,

its data-intensive display appears to burden older and slower computers, especially when using TPN or online product catalogs. The site is supported by small advertising banners that are very unobtrusive. Although animated, they do not appear to cause delays in page loading. This is a refreshing contrast to some Internet sites.

## EASE OF NAVIGATION

Thomas Register's structure is easy to understand and navigate, but also inflexible insofar as it mirrors the search process. The user must proceed through the screens in a specified order to get results, with the only option being to back up or to start a new search. Collapsing more search features into the first search page would speed the process. Next and previous page buttons are present on most screens to ease browsing through long lists of hits.

## COMPARABILITY WITH OTHER INTERNET RESOURCES

IndustryNet (<http://www.industry.net>) offers free registered membership and a large directory of represented companies (20,000 companies and 10 million products) with links to Web sites and online product specifications. IndustryNet also includes a database of industry associations and organizations. For some companies, as in Thomas, the information provided is no more than an address and phone number.

IndustryNet's navigation is generally smoother than Thomas Register's. Manufacturers and distributors are clearly identified, and companies with extended Web links show up at the top of retrieval lists. IndustryNet's product categories are browsable, and a hierarchical tree of categories allows quick identification target products. Links to the latest industry news headlines by category are also incorporated. While covering fewer companies, IndustryNet has a more user-friendly interface than Thomas Register.

MRO Explorer (<http://www.mro-explorer.com>) offers a Yahoo!-like organized collection of links to manufacturing companies home pages. It can be useful as a Web site locator.

Manufacturing Marketplace (<http://www.manufacturing.net>) is produced by Cahners, the business publications division of Reed Elsevier. Here, searching for company data is combined with news headlines and other useful features, including links to contents and selected news items from trade magazines published by Cahners. One advantage of this site is that it allows searching restricted to only those companies with Web addresses, with e-mail addresses, or online specifications. Numerous features make navigation easy, including browsable industry groups and listings of all trade names and product categories associated with a company. This is an impressive one-stop shop for both news and product/company information.

## CONCLUSION

When compared with the print version, Thomas Register on the Web is much less costly and more convenient, offering significant advantages for those who do not need the additional asset and personnel data found in the print version. However, libraries and information centers will not yet want to dispose of the print (or CD-ROM) version, and users who have the money and the space may find it time-saving to use the print version for browsing listings. The online version links to Web pages, online catalogs, literature by fax, and online ordering are useful additions, but do not yet cover the majority of listed companies. Thomas' indexing is comprehensive and quirky in both the print and online versions. Considering the long-lived popularity of the print Thomas, the wealth of information Thomas Register on the Web makes available is quite welcome.

Nevertheless, Thomas Register is too literal a translation from print to a Web that has conditioned us to fluidity and flexibility. Thomas could provide more flexibility in searching and more open provision of e-mail and Web site data. Thomas' efforts to serve its advertisers sometimes hinder the user's access to information. Thomas Publishing could also make Thomas Register more attractive by integrating content from its other directories and new services, such as their newly introduced Product News Network, creating a unified one-stop site that could attract users with varying needs. As of now, other Internet sites are leading the way in ease of navigation and integration of content, even if they lag in authority or comprehensiveness. While an outstanding resource, Thomas Register on the Web does not fully exploit the potential of the medium.

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## NOTE

<sup>1</sup>All quoted material comes from the Thomas Register Web site (<http://www.thomasregister.com>).