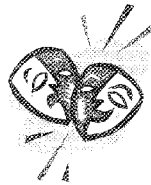


péter's picks & pans



Péter Jacsó
University of Hawaii

Zagat Survey

ACES Intelligent Shopping Agent

Blockbuster Music

My editor keeps me on a short leash when it comes to the types of databases to be reviewed, but once a year I may opt for ones that are beyond the scientific, technical, business, medical, or academic circles. This is reasonable because *EContent* readers also have a life, and most of them certainly dine out and buy books, CDs, or video flicks. I have no doubt that they also want to know their choices so that they can spend their money wisely. So this time my picks include the new Web version of the Zagat Survey of restaurants and a superbly enhanced and intelligent shopping agent, ACSES, for books, video, and music. The pan is the Web site of Blockbuster Music that may shed some light on why well-established brick and mortar stores are left in the dust by many competing Web stores.

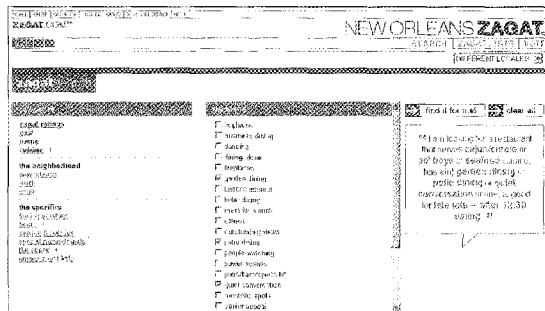


the picks

THE ZAGAT SURVEY

The maroon-colored Zagat Survey guides to restaurants, first published in the early 1980s, became an overnight success. No wonder that the print content has been licensed to several CD-ROM travel guides and that

Specifying search criteria through pop-up check boxes on the Zagat site



Microsoft chose it as its culinary guide for the Sidewalk project. Those implementations were OK, but they don't come close to what the original chefs cooked up and started to serve this past June. The publisher's own Web site (<http://www.zagat.com>) currently covers about 17,000 eating places (there are a few duplicate entries) in 20+ locales (cities, regions, states) with more to come. The focus is North American, although both London and Paris are included. Of course, it does not cover every decent place (it missed two of my local favorites in the test), but offers enough choice for every palate.

The design and typography of the printed Zagat guides unmistakably come through in the intuitive interface that offers a simple search mode (if you remember at least part of the name or, in some cases, how it sounds), and an advanced search

mode for the discriminating gourmand. With the latter you can filter the restaurants—within a chosen locale—by a combination of rating scores for food, décor, and service (each on a scale from 0 to 30); price, types of cuisines, scene or ambiance (patio dining, romantic spots, historic interest), city districts, service features (valet service, validated parking), special menus (brunch, dinner buffet, children's menu), and opening hours. Some of the filters are common for every destination; others are specific to the locale (such as Cajun/Creole, po' boy sandwich, or jazz brunch for New Orleans). Choosing filters is a straightforward process and, as you are progressing with adding new filters, your query is translated into vernacular and displayed on the side.

There are also predefined lists for browsing. Beyond the obvious top

overall favorites; top lists by type of cuisine; and scores by food, décor, and service. There is an alphabetic list, a list by district and cuisine, and some unusual lists of restaurants, including top 20 female traffic and top 20 male traffic, as well as sleepers (little-known places with excellent food) and teflons (that have so-so food but still attract a lot of customers for other features, hence don't let criticism stick). In spite of the excellent set of predefined categories and filters I still would like to have the option for free text searching, because there could be a criterion that doesn't appear among the filters due to its rarity, but is exactly what I am looking for. In case of New Orleans, I wanted to find the restaurant that I recalled has gospel brunches but—understandably—this rare feature was not a filter.

The results list is presented in a quick to scan format with the essential information about the restaurants. It can be sorted by clicking on the heading of any of the data elements listed (name, cuisine, district, food, décor, service, and price). The results list is presented in batches of 15. It would be better to let the user specify how many should be displayed at once and, more importantly, to allow downloading the results list so that users could create the backbone for a customized list that could be further processed and enhanced by personal notes in a spreadsheet or database program.

The full record includes such additional information as the exact address, the phone number, and a short review, summarizing the pro and con arguments of the reviewers. For New Orleans, 1,200 diners provided reviews for 512 restaurants, and 417 made it to the database. Quite an impressive number even if you know that in New Orleans there are two time periods: meal times and times in-between. The reviews are short but to the point—even though the most poignant ones could not be included, probably to avoid libel suits (such as "dishes look like roadkill" or "the last stop before food stamps"). These are, however, available in the outtake section without identifying the restaurant.

The full record lists the filtering features and the scores of the restaurant,

The screenshot shows a web browser window with the title "ZAGAT". The page content includes a search bar and a table of results. The table has columns for restaurant name, cuisine, and various scores. The results are sorted by score, with the highest score being 94 for "Academy Street".

RESTAURANT	CUISINE	SCORE	PRICE	DECOR	SERVICE
Academy Street	Academy Street	94	\$\$\$	4	4
Academy Street	Academy Street	93	\$\$\$	4	4
Academy Street	Academy Street	92	\$\$\$	4	4
Academy Street	Academy Street	91	\$\$\$	4	4
Academy Street	Academy Street	90	\$\$\$	4	4
Academy Street	Academy Street	89	\$\$\$	4	4
Academy Street	Academy Street	88	\$\$\$	4	4
Academy Street	Academy Street	87	\$\$\$	4	4
Academy Street	Academy Street	86	\$\$\$	4	4
Academy Street	Academy Street	85	\$\$\$	4	4
Academy Street	Academy Street	84	\$\$\$	4	4
Academy Street	Academy Street	83	\$\$\$	4	4
Academy Street	Academy Street	82	\$\$\$	4	4
Academy Street	Academy Street	81	\$\$\$	4	4
Academy Street	Academy Street	80	\$\$\$	4	4
Academy Street	Academy Street	79	\$\$\$	4	4
Academy Street	Academy Street	78	\$\$\$	4	4
Academy Street	Academy Street	77	\$\$\$	4	4
Academy Street	Academy Street	76	\$\$\$	4	4
Academy Street	Academy Street	75	\$\$\$	4	4
Academy Street	Academy Street	74	\$\$\$	4	4
Academy Street	Academy Street	73	\$\$\$	4	4
Academy Street	Academy Street	72	\$\$\$	4	4
Academy Street	Academy Street	71	\$\$\$	4	4
Academy Street	Academy Street	70	\$\$\$	4	4
Academy Street	Academy Street	69	\$\$\$	4	4
Academy Street	Academy Street	68	\$\$\$	4	4
Academy Street	Academy Street	67	\$\$\$	4	4
Academy Street	Academy Street	66	\$\$\$	4	4
Academy Street	Academy Street	65	\$\$\$	4	4
Academy Street	Academy Street	64	\$\$\$	4	4
Academy Street	Academy Street	63	\$\$\$	4	4
Academy Street	Academy Street	62	\$\$\$	4	4
Academy Street	Academy Street	61	\$\$\$	4	4
Academy Street	Academy Street	60	\$\$\$	4	4
Academy Street	Academy Street	59	\$\$\$	4	4
Academy Street	Academy Street	58	\$\$\$	4	4
Academy Street	Academy Street	57	\$\$\$	4	4
Academy Street	Academy Street	56	\$\$\$	4	4
Academy Street	Academy Street	55	\$\$\$	4	4
Academy Street	Academy Street	54	\$\$\$	4	4
Academy Street	Academy Street	53	\$\$\$	4	4
Academy Street	Academy Street	52	\$\$\$	4	4
Academy Street	Academy Street	51	\$\$\$	4	4
Academy Street	Academy Street	50	\$\$\$	4	4
Academy Street	Academy Street	49	\$\$\$	4	4
Academy Street	Academy Street	48	\$\$\$	4	4
Academy Street	Academy Street	47	\$\$\$	4	4
Academy Street	Academy Street	46	\$\$\$	4	4
Academy Street	Academy Street	45	\$\$\$	4	4
Academy Street	Academy Street	44	\$\$\$	4	4
Academy Street	Academy Street	43	\$\$\$	4	4
Academy Street	Academy Street	42	\$\$\$	4	4
Academy Street	Academy Street	41	\$\$\$	4	4
Academy Street	Academy Street	40	\$\$\$	4	4
Academy Street	Academy Street	39	\$\$\$	4	4
Academy Street	Academy Street	38	\$\$\$	4	4
Academy Street	Academy Street	37	\$\$\$	4	4
Academy Street	Academy Street	36	\$\$\$	4	4
Academy Street	Academy Street	35	\$\$\$	4	4
Academy Street	Academy Street	34	\$\$\$	4	4
Academy Street	Academy Street	33	\$\$\$	4	4
Academy Street	Academy Street	32	\$\$\$	4	4
Academy Street	Academy Street	31	\$\$\$	4	4
Academy Street	Academy Street	30	\$\$\$	4	4
Academy Street	Academy Street	29	\$\$\$	4	4
Academy Street	Academy Street	28	\$\$\$	4	4
Academy Street	Academy Street	27	\$\$\$	4	4
Academy Street	Academy Street	26	\$\$\$	4	4
Academy Street	Academy Street	25	\$\$\$	4	4
Academy Street	Academy Street	24	\$\$\$	4	4
Academy Street	Academy Street	23	\$\$\$	4	4
Academy Street	Academy Street	22	\$\$\$	4	4
Academy Street	Academy Street	21	\$\$\$	4	4
Academy Street	Academy Street	20	\$\$\$	4	4
Academy Street	Academy Street	19	\$\$\$	4	4
Academy Street	Academy Street	18	\$\$\$	4	4
Academy Street	Academy Street	17	\$\$\$	4	4
Academy Street	Academy Street	16	\$\$\$	4	4
Academy Street	Academy Street	15	\$\$\$	4	4
Academy Street	Academy Street	14	\$\$\$	4	4
Academy Street	Academy Street	13	\$\$\$	4	4
Academy Street	Academy Street	12	\$\$\$	4	4
Academy Street	Academy Street	11	\$\$\$	4	4
Academy Street	Academy Street	10	\$\$\$	4	4
Academy Street	Academy Street	9	\$\$\$	4	4
Academy Street	Academy Street	8	\$\$\$	4	4
Academy Street	Academy Street	7	\$\$\$	4	4
Academy Street	Academy Street	6	\$\$\$	4	4
Academy Street	Academy Street	5	\$\$\$	4	4
Academy Street	Academy Street	4	\$\$\$	4	4
Academy Street	Academy Street	3	\$\$\$	4	4
Academy Street	Academy Street	2	\$\$\$	4	4
Academy Street	Academy Street	1	\$\$\$	4	4

Sortable results for Zagat listed restaurants with essential data elements of records matching the criteria

offering a good starting point to find other establishments that match one or more of the criteria. The scores, the cost range, the cuisine, and the neighborhood can be adjusted, while the feature list acts like a hot-linked descriptor list in bibliographic databases. This is one of the few programs where searching based on similarity is not a voodoo process but one based on a straightforward algorithm. A map is available for every restaurant that I checked, and—courtesy of MapQuest—a door-to-door driving direction could be displayed where you may specify the point of origin and the restaurant's address is the default destination point.

This is a really nifty product that currently requires only registration. Zagat may charge later for full access, but probably will be able to maintain it for free from sponsors' advertisements. It would be nice to add menus, and photos of the interior of the restaurants, especially as many already have their own Web sites with such features so that a hotlink would be all that is needed. Marking individual records, downloading them, or printing them in a foldout format would earn this site a 30-30-30 score, and I can hardly wait for the Zagat Survey of hotels.



ACSES INTELLIGENT SHOPPING AGENT

I did not include the first incarnation of ACSES (<http://www.acses.com>) in my review of shopping robots a year ago ("Shopbots: Shopping Robots

for Electronic Commerce," *ONLINE*, July/August, 1998, pp. 14-20) because it required the user to provide the ISBN of the book before it would do a comparative search across electronic bookshops. A year later I am happy to report that ACSES has matured into a most intelligent—although not perfect—shopping agent. It can find the best bargains for books, CDs, and videos based on the most common search criteria and their combination, such as author/artist, title, publisher/label, keyword, publication/release year, and some additional material-specific filters (director, producer, ISBN). It searches about 40 book, 10 music, and 10 video stores. Some German and other European stores are included because the producer of ACSES is Münchhoff & Janz GmbH. ACSES has a simple interface that allows you to search by a single criterion, and an advanced search mode that lets you combine multiple search criteria (such as artist and year). The full search mode sports a variant of the advanced search templates allowing you to change the fields to be searched. This is necessary when you want to search, for example, for a movie featuring two actors/actresses of your choice.

ACSES lists the matching titles in a fairly compact and informative format. However, it does not always recognize that two items are really identical (including the ISBN), differing only in punctuation. Also, it gives Top Matches billing for titles that are not as exact as the ones listed under the Full Results heading. In response to the title search Golden Heart, it lists under Top Matches the correct album then the single "How Can You Mend a Broken Heart" and the album "One From The Heart." Under Full

ACES' Full Search template allows the user to change the index fields

The screenshot shows the ACSES search interface. At the top, it says "aces" and "The Search Engine". Below that, there's a search bar with "Search Movies by: Title" and a "Search" button. The main area is titled "Advanced Search" and contains a form with several search criteria: Title, Director, Star, Release Year, Label, and Format. Each criterion has a dropdown menu and a radio button for "AND" or "OR" logic. There are also links for "Basic Search", "Full Search", and "Advanced Search".

how long ACSES should wait for response from a site (the default is 20 seconds per site).



the pan

BLOCKBUSTER MUSIC

Conventional wisdom had it that brick and mortar companies with impressive clout and deep pockets would have an advantage in establishing the most successful web commerce sites. Conventional wisdom proved wrong when Amazon.com burst on the scene, leaving Barnes & Noble and Borders in the dust (although lately both of them seem to have been coming out from their rigor mortis). Blockbuster Entertainment (<http://www.blockbuster.com/music>), however, remains an inappropriate Web commerce site for both video and music. I panned their video site once before in this column. Relatively speaking, the music site was better at that time, but by now its deficiencies are quite obvious when looking at the Web-born competitors. Interestingly, the Looksmart directory describes it as a "well-produced site [that] also includes audio samples and special offers".

I tested Blockbuster's information for a number of artists and albums,

Results ACSES lists two others: "Here's A Heart: Golden Classics" and "Piece of My Heart: Golden Classics" that match the query better. Neither does it recognize the quote symbol for exact phrase searching, but this is probably due to the fact that some of its destination sites don't have that capability. The other features mightily compensate for these minor inconveniences.

Details of the selected item are displayed, often accompanied by the cover photo of the book or CD album (courtesy of Barnes & Noble and Muze, Inc.) along with such relevant information as track list, cast, and annotations. I would not be surprised if sound samples are added soon to the CD album listings to allow the user to get a feel about the content. These are available already at most of the shops checked by ACSES but users may prefer to sample the album from within ACSES.

The price comparison is quick and the results list format and content are better than in the other search engines. It includes the actual cost of purchase, the shop's name, the item price, the discount percent, the shipping cost (based on the destination information that you supplied in an earlier step), the shipping time, the type of shipping service, and the estimated delivery time (if available). Widely advertised discounts may not matter as the shipping cost can offset the discount from the list price. It also shows what differences there are in

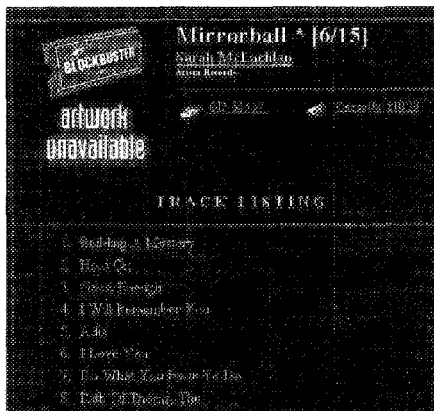
shipping costs for identical or comparable services, and that the estimated delivery time may offset the seemingly more expedient delivery service. ACSES provides the details to make the ultimate decision in an easy to compare manner. In the test example Soundstone is the winner. A quick check at the shop showed that the album is not only the least expensive, but also readily available for shipping.

It is an important and unique extra feature that you can search for different items from different shops. ACSES will provide similar lists to help you figure out which shop offers the best deal for a combination of items. Given the complexity of the process it is fairly quick, and the user can specify

The screenshot shows the ACSES search results page. At the top, it says "aces" and "The Search Engine". Below that, there's a search bar with "Search Music by: Album" and "Golden Heart". The main area is titled "Search Results" and contains a list of search results. The first result is "Golden Heart" by Mark Knopfler, released in 1985. The second result is "How Can You Mend a Broken Heart" by Todd Rundgren, released in 1971. The third result is "One From The Heart" by Original Soundtracks, released in 1997. There are also links for "Related FAQ" and "Your recently viewed items".

Search results on ACSES for the Album titled "Golden Heart"

Blockbuster Music's high price tag and low information content



and for most of them sites such as Amazon, CDNow, and CDWorld were better in every regard. As for music samples, Blockbuster Music is the most frugal. For example, for the 1999 rereleases of half a dozen Johnny Cash albums (such as "Johnny '99," "There You Go," "Just as I Am," "Greatest Hits," and "16 Biggest Hits") none had any music samples, or even an album

cover. The albums that do have sound samples feature three or four 30-second samples at most. The samples are in AU format—the typical file format five years ago, but it is extremely slow to download and the quality is poor. In case of one of the top albums, the much anticipated "Mirrorball" (also spelled as "Mirror Ball") by Sarah McLachlan, CDWorld had a

sample for all the 14 songs in Real Audio format. Amazon also had the album cover and a review, and offered for two months two full tracks in splendid Liquid Audio quality for free. CDNow had samples for all the tracks in three formats: Real Audio, medium quality MPEG, and high quality MPEG. Blockbuster Music had nothing but the track list and by far the highest price. While Amazon, CDNow, CD Universe, and Borders have a \$12.57-\$12.59 price tag, and CDWorld sells it for \$13.77, Blockbuster Music charges \$15.97. Blockbuster Entertainment had a grip on the video rental market, and was innovative in allowing customers to listen to any CD—not just the ones at the listening stations—before buying an album. Their marketing savvy, however, does not show at their Web site.

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