

The Consumer Information Disc

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The Consumer Information Disc (CID) contains most of the books and publications currently available from the Federal Government's Consumer Information Center at Pueblo, Colorado. The same disc contains both the DOS and Windows versions. It covers subjects ranging from condoms to travel and anything in between. SmartTrieve from Compton's New Media allows retrieving text, images, and sound under DOS, Windows, or multimedia operating systems.

Subject Coverage

The disc groups topics under the following major sections with subsections becoming available after opening the topic.

<u>Topic</u>	<u>Entries</u>
Business	13
Children	4
Education	10
Facts	8
Finance	23
Food	13
Health	56
Home	25
Jobs	4
Military	4
Miscellaneous	15
Nature	8
Space	2
Travel	9
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Total	194

Each group contains a diverse set of subjects. The user can learn about patents or resumes; find many application forms, a small business directory, books for children, gas saving products; gather information on consumer fraud, eating for good life, acne, obsessive-compulsive disorder, etc. In other words, this CD has something for everyone and every occasion. This does not mean, however, that it gives the definitive word on any of the issues it covers. It merely contains the electronic versions of the government booklets that provide a general understanding of the topic. Many booklets contain addresses of some agencies and organizations for further information.

Search window under Microsoft Windows. Installation

(Note: After the installation in both DOS and Windows, the evaluation has been done mostly in Windows.)

The installation process is fairly straightforward and just about the same under DOS or Windows. To install the software under DOS, the user types:

```
d:install
```

Where d: designates the CD-ROM drive. The rest of the installation is almost automatic. The installation software creates a directory called PUEBDOS on the hard disk and copies the software to it. It may make modifications in the CONFIG.SYS or AUTOEXEC.BAT files depending on their contents. On my test system, the installation process changed the FILES = 8 line in the CONFIG.SYS file. Apparently, the software needs 30 file handles. This is a blind faith change by the installation software. It does not actually check how many file handles are there but reads the line in the CONFIG.SYS file. I use QEMM and add 40 file handles using FILES.COM included in the QEMM software. The installation software did not see this correctly -- a very minor nuisance since deleting the new file and renaming the old one took care of the problem.

Installation in Windows is equally simple. Just select "Run" from the Program Manager "File" menu and either type d:WINSTALL or use the browse feature to point-and-shoot the drive and the WINSTALL program. Then, the installation program will restart Windows to load its typeface and a video driver. Therefore, I recommend not having anything running before the installation to minimize the possibility of losing unsaved data elsewhere. The installation process will create a batch file in the DOS version and a new Program Manager group in the Windows version.

The printed documentation says that the DOS version will require 1 MB and the Windows version 2.5 MB of free disk space. In reality, the DOS version occupies a little under 1 MB and the Windows version around 1.4 MB. The APPSETUP.INF file used in the installation also shows the minimum space requirement as 1.5 MB.

Power users have the option of editing the APPSETUP.INF for customized installation under rare circumstances. At the end of the installation I identified two new files copied to the windows\SYSTEM directory:

```
TMEFNT.FON  
VGAPAL.DRV
```

The first one contains the display font (why?) the program uses and the second a display driver of some sort. Watch for a hint later to make the type face more readable and more to your liking.

One thing I do not appreciate (and this is not the fault of the software producers alone) is the endless files they keep putting in the windows directory. Some of these files must be overwriting previous versions; and that makes me nervous. It is getting more difficult to know what is original Microsoft stuff and what came with various software I have been installing over the last couple of years. I am not sure whether this installation also "renewed" any system files. I rate the installation good (4) on a scale of 1-5.

Documentation

The documentation consists of an eight-page insert in the jewel box. It is very basic, covering only absolute essentials like installing and starting the program. CID has online help available but not thorough. It includes information not applicable to this

product. For instance, in the Windows version, help suggests: "To browse the list of sound descriptions, select Sound Finder by clicking on its button." I have not been able to find "Sound Finder." This discrepancy may be due to the generic infobase engine and generic help that may go with it. I rate the documentation below average (2).

Use

This is a fun CD to use. One can browse through the titles with no definite idea in mind and stop when something interesting appears. The "Idea Search" option allows searching for specific topics. It uses a simple search process and does not support Boolean operators. All the queries search the full text and may result in some surprises, such as the following when I searched for "music:."

"INTERNATIONAL MAIL
Airmail and surface mail ...

3. Printed Matter -- includes regular printed matter, books and sheet *music*, publishers' periodicals, ..."

Therefore, for fun I suggest experimentation. How else would I learn about dental sealants, and that they come in clear or color!

The Windows database displays the subheadings in each booklet (), thus making it easier to get an idea about the contents. When it first starts though, it may have picked up the DOS database since both are available to the Windows access software. Make sure that you highlight the GOVTWIN database (see .) Also, make sure that you do not select both databases. This does not cause any harm but displays two almost identical windows which you can select alternately. I think, selecting both databases confuses the issue.

Selecting the Windows data base will list the subcategories in the search window.

After finding a booklet to explore, a double click on the title will open the text window and display the contents. I have not tried every topic; but it appears that every one of them starts with the silly "sound" selector in the DOS version or the headphones under Windows. I say "silly" because it is! If you have a sound board, double clicking on the sound icon will READ THE TITLE, Wow! The intonation and the reading are quite strange. Try the sound in "Patents," "Caring about kid when parents divorce," "Are There any Public Lands for Sale?" After having a bit of fun, the sound feature is quite useless, annoying, and incorrectly done. Make sure that your kids do not learn pronunciation or intonation by listening to these sound clips!

Images must have been scanned from the booklets and are of marginal quality. Of course, we cannot attribute this to carelessness on the part of the CD-ROM publisher but probably to the marginal quality of the originals. I suppose they could have used some enhancements on the images; but expecting that from a product under \$50 is not really fair. Most of the images I viewed were in black-and-white; and many were drawn rather than photographed. But one will find a picture of asparagus (worth a look), broccoli, "Bush Lima Beans," "Black Plastic Covering" (what covering? It is a picture of a little girl kneeling on ...), etc. As strange as some images may seem, there are quite a few very informative ones. However, some are uselessly blurred, such as the contents of "Path to Heart Disease."

The information content should be reasonably free from commercial bias since the government presumably provides all information. The dates of some publications (whenever evident from something in the text) follow the publication dates of the pamphlets. I have seen many with 1992 dates here and there. This would imply that the time sensitive information is reasonably up-to-date. I rate the use of the product slightly above average (3.5).

Customer Support

I called to test the availability and the quality of customer service at 5:45 PM on a Saturday. I was pleasantly surprised when someone answered after the third ring. It surprised me so much that I had to ask whether indeed I had the Quanta Press service line. The person was quite pleasant and helpful in answering the questions. He did not know, however, why the product did not have some of the features explained in the help. His frankness in admitting the shortcomings of the engine and the difficulties in transferring this kind of printed material into electronic form pleased me. I rate customer support good (4).

Recommendations

I have a few recommendations for improving the product. Some are cosmetic; others operational or content related..

- * Some tables in the text have numbers and text that are not properly aligned. This makes reading quite cumbersome.

- * The layout of the presentation is awkward. For instance, every paragraph is indented by "one character" which is not deep enough to make a strong optical separation, yet irregular enough to distract from the view.

- * The typeface used in windows is not easy to read and there is no option to change it. I would like to see a changeable option, at least manually, by changing or adding a line in the SMARTDRW.INI file. However, I have found a roundabout way of changing the typeface to something more readable. Here is the hint I mentioned earlier:

1. Make a backup copy of the type face this program installs (called TMEFNT.FON) or simply rename it.
2. Copy a fixed font file to TMEFNT.FON; and the screen text will display in that font. I used "Lucida Sans" (file name V4SP.FON) which I found quite readable. This approach may not work with a scaleable True Type font. Yet, I may be wrong on this.

- * The software features and their explanation in the help system are not consistent. For example, the software has no "Picture Tour" or "Sound Finder" as explained in the help file.

- * Help text is not always helpful or easy to understand. For example, Idea Search looks for your words and other words related in spelling. What kind of relationship does it imply? Does this mean that the software does a "Soundex" kind of search; or will it relate to other words by common spelling errors? It certainly does not mean that a search word like "music" will also find related

occurrences of "musician." Because it does not include the entries that a search with "musician" provides.

Product Specifications

Hardware Requirements: IBM PC/XT/AT or compatible, 1MB RAM, VGA monitor, ISO 9660 compatible CD-ROM drive, or Macintosh Plus or better, 1 MB RAM, HFS compatible CD-ROM drive with Foreign File Access program.

Software Requirements: PC-DOS, MS-DOS 3.1 or higher, Microsoft CD-ROM extensions.

Price: \$49.95

Producer: QUANTA Press, Inc., 1313 Fifth Street SE, Suite 208C, Minneapolis, MN 55414 (USA); Telephone: (612) 379-3956, fax: (612) 623-4570.