

The Charleston ADVISOR

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ADVISOR REVIEWS—STANDARD REVIEW

SimplyMap

February 2, 2009

Composite Score:

★★★★ 1/4

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Pricing Options

Pricing for SimplyMap begins at \$7,195 for the basic package and one simultaneous user with add-on packages such as historical census data or Mediamark's (MRI) Survey of the American Consumer data and additional simultaneous users costing extra. Discounts are available for libraries belonging to consortia and colleges with low FTEs (under 3,000). SimplyMap's pricing structure is based on simultaneous users instead of FTEs, the assumption being that larger institutions with a large number of patrons will require more simultaneous users. Therefore, a library serving 4,000 FTEs will be charged the same base price as a library with 50,000 FTEs, but it is likely that the library serving 50,000 FTEs will pay for more simultaneous users. SimplyMap is also available to public libraries with the same pricing structure as academic institutions. Public libraries serving communities with less than 40,000 patrons will receive discounts.

Product Description

SimplyMap is a powerful tool for users who need to access demographic data and consumer spending data geographically and export their results into either colorful thematic maps or Excel spreadsheets. The purpose of the database is to help users obtain consumer or demographic information for the following geographic regions in the United States: census block groups, census block tracts, zip codes, cities, counties, and states. With SimplyMap users can locate a ranking of zip codes with the highest median household incomes or discover which cities spend the most on hair care products. Business researchers seeking the best locations to open stores or market products are probably the main audience for SimplyMap. While its business applications are more apparent, SimplyMap will also be useful for social science researchers who need information on poverty, crime statistics, and educational levels at a regional level.

SimplyMap receives its data from United States government sources and private data providers such as Mediamark (MRI) and Easy Analytic Software (EASI). Users will appreciate that much of the government data in SimplyMap provided from departments such as the Census Bureau and the Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS) has been updated by EASI to provide estimates for 2007 or 2008 and forecasted data for 2011 and 2012.

SimplyMap's basic package has the most commonly requested Census Bureau demographic data. This Census data is at the heart of SimplyMap and will be applicable to the broadest range of users. Another important data set included in the basic package is consumer expenditure data from the BLS. Consumer expenditure data will answer questions such as "Which cities in the United States spend the most on ice cream?" One of the quirkiest and most problematic resources

contained in the basic package is the Market Segments section that organizes households into demographic categories with descriptions such as "Unattached and Available" or "Trailer Park City." The basic package is rounded out with crime data, the Sales Potential Index from the Census Bureau's ZIP Code Business Patterns, and employment data organized by industry.

For an additional charge users have access to more specialized data sets. One of these additional packages is the Consumer Survey package from MRI that provides consumer spending data on specific products such as camcorders to air purifiers. Moreover, this data package will include data on spending on specific brands. Business researchers can determine which regions of the country spend the most money on expensive baby clothes or are the most likely to have visited a McDonald's restaurant in the last six months. Another add-on package of interest to both business and social science researchers is EAST's Life Stage Clusters. Users can find which locations have the highest concentrations of specific household categories with the following criteria: age, presence of children, marital status and household income. For example, users can search the Life Stage Clusters to locate young households (25–34 years) that have children and high incomes. Finally, social science researchers will benefit from the historical census add-on module that includes Census data for 1980, 1990, and 2000.

Critical Evaluation

SEARCHING

Users will have to register and create a personal workspace before they can conduct any searches with SimplyMap. Individual workspaces allow users to save previous searches and keep track of lengthy lists of variables they have compiled. Users need to select both a geographic location and a variable (Census data, consumer expenditures, crime rate, etc.); however, it doesn't matter in which order they select the location or the variable. Users can select locations that can range from the numerically miniscule Census block groups to larger entities such as states. After selecting a region and clicking Go, the map in the right hand column will immediately provide an image of the geographic parameters that were chosen. In addition to selecting a location, users must also select a variable, without which one will receive an empty map. Variables refer to data points such as demographics, crime rates, or consumer spending. To select variables, users select the variables tab and search for the variable they need by either entering a keyword or clicking the plus sign next to the broad categories (Census 2008, MRI Consumer Survey Data 2007, etc.) to drill down to the information they need. After selecting the variables they need, users will find that their selections are added to the variables heading in the left-hand column. As soon as they click the Update button next

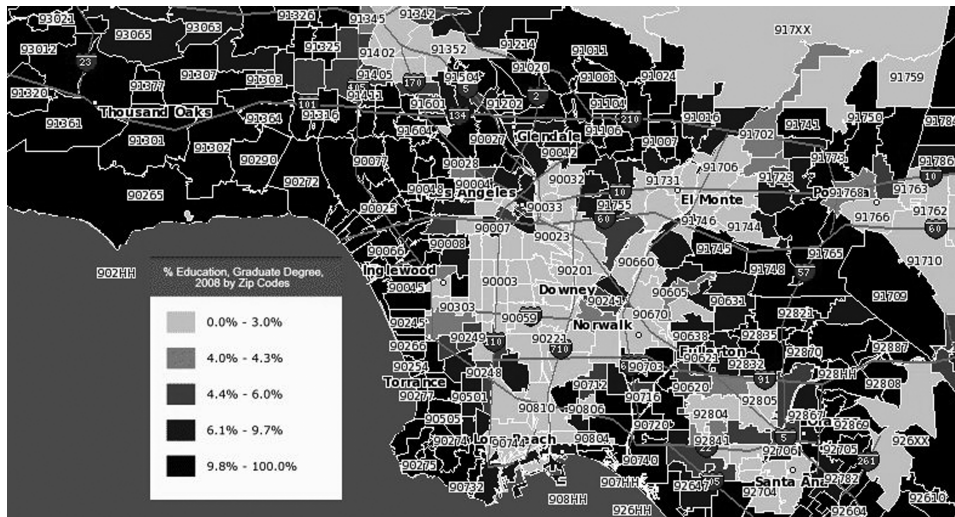


FIGURE 1 A typical map generated by searching for user-defined variables in SimplyMap reflects those variables by colors (here shades of gray).

With the Rank feature, users can retrieve lists that rank their variable by the geographical breakdown they have selected. Business researchers who want to create a map listing businesses that might compete with their firm can use the Points of Interest option. The Points of Interest feature cleverly exploits the advantages of a visual search by allowing users to display markers that indicate specific businesses on the map.

to the variables heading, the map will reflect the addition of the variable and use a coloring scheme to indicate the highest concentrations of the variables (indicated by shades of gray in Figure 1). The legend that appears over the map can be easily edited to change either the colors or the numeric breakdowns. The zoom and pan features enable users to change the size of the map and determine which area to visually emphasize.

Once a map has been created, users have a choice of how they display and work with the data. By scrolling down to the bottom of the screen, users can export the map either as an image or as an Excel spreadsheet. Even though the database is called SimplyMap, some users may not want actual maps, but rather demographic and consumer spending data on a geographic level. Researchers that need a comparison of their chosen variable with the rest of the United States can select the Report tab at the top of the screen (Figure 2). The Report feature lists the data for the variable in one column and compares the information with the median for the entire United States. A bar graph that benchmarks the chosen location against the rest of the United States is also available.

More specialized search options are available as well. Many users of SimplyMap will want to know which regions of the United States have the highest concentrations of the variable they have chosen.

Many specialized search features are especially appealing to sophisticated researchers. By employing the Ring Studies feature, one can receive information about their variable for locations that are one, three, and five miles away from the geographic region they have selected. Power users will also want to utilize the Query option. When users utilize the Queries, they can create maps or reports that combine several criteria. For example, a researcher wishing to identify locations for a veterinary service catering to wealthy clients can create a query that combines variables specifying a high amount spent on pets and households with high median incomes. After running the query, the user would receive a map that identified the locations that met all the specified criteria. The Query option is one of the reasons that SimplyMap provides users with personal workspaces. It would be too time-consuming for researchers to continually recreate their queries.

With database search interfaces there is often a trade-off between simplicity and power. SimplyMap definitely favors the power user over the novice. When a new user approaches the interface, the necessary steps to conduct a search aren't obvious and far from intuitive. One suggestion for SimplyMap would be to make the database more user-friendly by creating a search wizard structure to guide the user through the necessary series of steps to complete a search. For example, SimplyMap could start the search process by forcing the user to select a geographic category, next select a variable, then select any special options like ranking, and finally select an output option. In fairness to SimplyMap, geographic searching is far more complex than searching for articles in a periodicals database. Most users are accustomed to typing keywords into a Google-type interface and are unprepared for the sophistication that geographic searching requires. Also, SimplyMap is much simpler to

1	Sort Order	Variable Group	Variables	Los Angeles County, CA	ALL OF USA
2			Geographic Unit	County	
3	1		% Education, Graduate Degree, 2008	9.21%	9.43%
4	2		% HHs Buying - Books: Medium Users: 4-9 Bought last 12 months: Total Category, 2007	15.07%	15.08%
5	3		% HHs Owning - Personal Computers (Desktop: Own at home) or Personal Computers (Laptop/Notebook/Tablet: Own at home), 2007	68.11%	68.13%
6	4		% HHs Owning - Video Game Systems: Xbox: Household owns, 2007	8.66%	8.30%
7	5		% Speaks Spanish, 2007	39.16%	11.42%
8	6		Elementary and high school tuition (HH Avg \$), 2007	\$180.07	\$180.32
9	7		HH Inc., Median (\$), 2007	\$46,950.00	\$49,565.00
10	8		Reading (HH Avg \$), 2007	\$125.25	\$129.46

FIGURE 2 Search results can also be export the data in maps to an Excel spreadsheet.



SimplyMap Review Scores Composite: ★★★★★ 1/4

The maximum number of stars in each category is 5.

Content: ★★★★★

Most of the content in SimplyMap is of a high quality and up to date. Users can combine data variables with geographic parameters to obtain thematic maps and Excel Spreadsheets; however, the inaccuracies with the Market Segments data prevent SimplyMap from receiving five stars.

Searchability: ★★★

The searching tools are very powerful and users can uncover data sets they could never locate using free government Web sites such as the Census Bureau. Unfortunately, the interface is not intuitive and most users will not be able to exploit SimplyMap's potential without assistance.

Pricing Options: ★★★★★

SimplyMap is reasonably priced for the quality of the data. Many libraries will be able to offset its cost by cancelling their subscriptions to print reference books such as *The Sourcebook of Zip Code Demographics* or *Demographics USA*.

Contract Options: ★★★★★

The contract provisions are reasonable and SimplyMap provides excellent customer service.

use than the traditional Geographic Information Systems (GIS). In fact many libraries that support GIS programs have full-time subject specialists devoted to them. SimplyMap includes tutorials, but many users won't have the patience to view them. Unfortunately, many researchers will not be able to successfully use SimplyMap without assistance from a librarian.

CONTENT

Much of the data in SimplyMap is available free on government Web sites. However, a lot of the data on free government Web sites such as the Census Bureau is too outdated for the needs of many researchers. EASI, one of SimplyMap's data contributors, makes the Census information and BLS consumer expenditures data much more useful by updating the information to include 2007 or 2008 estimates and 2011 and 2012 forecasts. In addition, searching tools allow users to create thematic maps with the data and determine which locations have the highest concentration of a given variable. It's hard to separate a discussion of content from an evaluation of searching since the search options allow users to reveal connections between regions and variables they never could have discovered on free Web sites. The Census Bureau Web site makes users first select a geographic location and then choose the variables they want for that region. However, many researchers will have a variable such as income in mind and will want to know which locations are the wealthiest or most poverty stricken. SimplyMap enables users to combine variables with geographical parameters to receive a list of the wealthiest or poorest locations. These powerful retrieval options also extend to the consumer spending data. The BLS Web site for consumer expenditures will not allow users the ability to discover which zip codes in Los Angeles spend the most on life insurance. What's more, the BLS Web site will not provide users with the option of creating a colorful map with their data.

When researchers search for statistical data in a database, they often want to know the origin of the data and whether it is from an authori-

tative source. It's easy for users to discover the sources and definitions of the content in SimplyMap. When users are selecting variables, they can double click a variable to receive its definition and the government agency or company that supplied SimplyMap with the data.

The MRI Consumer Survey Data package, available for an extra fee, contains detailed consumer data that is unavailable in most library databases. Very few library resources will indicate which regions spend the most money on product categories such as video games. Instead most business resources only provide industry sales at the national level. By making consumer spending data available at the regional level, SimplyMap helps business researchers overcome a shortcoming with most business resources.

One of the least reliable and most problematic data sets in SimplyMap is the Market Segments data that is supplied by EASI. I used the "Very Rich Asians" category to locate a ranking of the zip codes in Los Angeles County that have the highest concentrations of affluent Asians. The zip code of 90062 was listed as the top zip code in Los Angeles County for wealthy Asians. I checked the 2007 Census data in SimplyMap and discovered that it has an Asian population of 1.79 percent and a median income of \$30,666 which makes it neither rich nor Asian. However, the zip code of 91108 in San Marino

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was ranked 39th in Los Angeles County despite having a median income of \$126,000 and an Asian population of 53.26 percent. When I searched the market segment category of “Very Rich Families,” I received equally abysmal results. A representative from SimplyMap explained that some of the Market Segment categories can be skewed if a few statistical outliers exist in a region. Zip codes and other small geographic categories appear to be more susceptible to these statistical anomalies. SimplyMap (and its users) would be better served by removing the Market Segments category from the database. Inaccurate and misleading results diminish users’ confidence in SimplyMap. Other data sets in SimplyMap appeared to be accurate, but a user receiving poor results from the Market Segments section might be less likely to use other SimplyMap data. In addition, SimplyMap provides more accurate options for locating the data that the Market Segments section purports to provide. I was able to accurately retrieve wealthy Asian zip codes in Los Angeles County with SimplyMap by using the Query feature to limit my results to zip codes that had an Asian population that exceeded 20 percent and median household incomes over \$100,000.

Despite the difficulty of its interface and the problematic Market Segments data, SimplyMap is a great research tool that occupies a unique niche among business and social science databases. Most libraries without a GIS department have few options for delivering geographic, demographic, and business data to their clientele. Moreover, SimplyMap provides libraries with the ability to supply users with access to customized thematic maps. Another important aspect of SimplyMap is the availability of industry sales figures and consumer spending on a regional level. Reference queries such as “which cities in California have the highest percentage of residents with a graduate degree?” can be very challenging to answer without a resource like SimplyMap. SimplyMap distinguishes itself among other business resources such as the Datamonitor Industry Profiles and Standard & Poor’s Industry Surveys since it provides industry and consumer spending at the regional rather than national level. Lastly, SimplyMap is a great tool for encouraging business researchers to think of business in geographic terms.

Contract Provisions

SimplyMap is available to users through IP Authentication. The contract restricts remote access to staff, faculty, and students of the subscribing institution, but walk-in users will be permitted to use SimplyMap on the premises. A review of SimplyMap wouldn’t be complete without mentioning their superb customer service. The sales reps are experts with SimplyMap and have a deep knowledge of the database. They immediately respond to any questions that customers might have and they are available for training sessions. A few months ago I assisted several students who requested information that required SimplyMap’s Rank feature, but the feature wasn’t available at the time of their request. I contacted our sales rep and he immediately conducted a search with the beta version of the Rank feature and sent an e-mail with an Excel spreadsheet of the needed information.

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Swartz, Steven. Phone conversation with Steven Swartz, Geographic Research Inc., January 30, 2009.

About the Author

Marc Vinyard has worked at Pepperdine University for ten years as an Information Services Librarian. His subject specialties are business and history. Prior to working at Pepperdine he was a business reference librarian at Glendale Public Library in California. Marc received his master’s in librarianship from the University of Washington. He has also written articles for *Searcher* and reviews for *Business Information Alert*. ■