

Web alert

That's an order

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When the going gets tough, the tough go shopping — but ordering reagents, chemicals and equipment can be a tedious side to life in the laboratory. Instead of browsing through piles of enormous catalogues, why not do your supply shopping through the internet? The web can broaden the range of suppliers readily available so that you can find exactly what you want and can make the whole process, from browsing to ordering, quicker.

There are many web sites to help the laboratory chemist or biologist find their way, and what follows here is a small selection. Unless otherwise indicated, access to all these sites is free of charge. Most of the relevant sites are commercially produced — either reflecting one company's attempts to sell its wares on the web or, in a few cases, a commercial organisation that exists solely to bring together primary service or product providers.

If you're a chemist, a good starting point is the WWW Chemistry Sites at Commercial Organizations, provided by the Chemistry Department at the University of California, Los Angeles. The list covers chemical, biosupply, instrumentation and software companies.

For the more biologically minded, two commercial compendia, BioSupplyNet and SciQuest, are well worth visiting. Both list hundreds of suppliers and thousands of products. BioSupplyNet can be searched or browsed by products or by supplier, but for actually making a purchase BioSupplyNet forwards you to the supplier's home page or provides you with contact details. As well as its huge database of instruments, chemicals, supplies, software and services, SciQuest provides a service called 'Ask Joe!'. Joe, an industry expert, might be able to help you find what you're looking for. SciQuest has also started an online auction service for second-hand laboratory equipment — goods can be registered for sale and if you are interested in a piece of equipment you can place a bid. Another site that specialises in a similar service is called 'Going, Going... Sold!!!'.

If you favour 'comparison shopping', the twice-monthly newspaper *The Scientist* has a LabConsumer site that contrasts a wide range of lab reagents, supplies and instruments. For example, a recent article compares the merits of various repetitive pipetters. Anderson's Timesaving Comparative Guides provides a list of supplies that allows you to search for a reagent, compare information from different suppliers and place an order directly with the supplier — although you must register to use the site, and only subscribers (laboratories and institutions) can place orders.

If you know what you want and also know who you want to supply it to you, you can go directly to the supplier's home page. Almost all suppliers have one, and as well as providing online catalogs and ordering, many company web sites also have technical information and protocols and even discussion forums. For example, Molecular Probes, a company that produces a wide range of fluorescent probes and chemicals for research, has a fully searchable site that includes a gallery of images demonstrating the probes in use. Registration to the company mailing list is easy and you can request a free copy of the handbook (any updates to the handbook can be viewed in HTML).

As a sampling of more specialist sites, the software supplier CambridgeSoft Corporation, provider of such favourites as ChemDraw, has a site that includes news in English, French, German, and Japanese. Scientific Instrument Services, Inc. offers supplies and services for mass spectrometers and gas and liquid chromatographs, from a user-friendly site. If you're more interested in saving space in the lab than filling it up with more equipment, try a visit to TrippNT for lab furniture and storage ideas. And if you'd like someone else to do some of the work for you, Salford Ultrafine Chemicals and Research produces chiral organic molecules to order.

The major biological and chemical supply distributors also provide web sites as alternatives to their paper catalogs. VWR's general catalog is searchable and browsable, while Fisher Scientific's six online catalogs include the Acros Organics Catalog of Fine Chemicals and the Fisher Chemical Catalog, which contains more than 48,000 chemicals and reagents.

The internet can be a fast and easy way to obtain product information, technical advice and the products themselves. Give it a try and, you never know, shopping might even be fun.

URLs

Chemistry Sites at Commercial Organizations	http://www.chem.ucla.edu/VL/Commercial.html
BioSupplyNet	http://www.biosupplynet.com/
SciQuest	http://www.sciquest.com
Going, Going...Sold!!!	http://www.going-going-sold.com
The Scientist Tools & Lab Consumer	http://www.the-scientist.library.upenn.edu/tools.html
Anderson's Timesaving Comparative Guides	http://www.atcg.com/atcg/atcghome.htm
Molecular Probes	http://www.probes.com/
CambridgeSoft Corporation	http://www.camsoft.com/
Scientific Instrument Services, Inc.	http://www.sisweb.com/
TrippNT	http://www.TrippNT.com/
Salford Ultrafine Chemicals and Research	http://www.personal.u-net.com/~ultrfine/
VWR Scientific Products	http://www.vwrsp.com/
Fisher Scientific	http://www.fisher1.com/