

Commercial Electronic Products for Virginia Legal Research

by Elizabeth Terry Long



Fortunately Virginia legal researchers have several electronic products from which to choose. Six products were compared: *CaseFinder* (Geronimo Development Corp.), *Michie's Virginia Law on Disc* (Lexis Publishing), *West's Virginia Reporter* and *Virginia Code* a.k.a. *Premise* (West Group), *LEXIS-NEXIS* (Lexis Publishing), *Loislaw* (Lois, Inc.), and *Westlaw* (West Group). The enclosed chart is designed to make your selection decisions easier.

A search strategy was devised for testing the ease of use of each product. The author searched for the definition of "manufacturing" or "manufacturer" as it appears in case law. The query was *defin* w/5 manufactur**. This strategy worked by producing a number of hits with *LEXIS*, *Westlaw*, *CaseFinder* and *Premise*. In *Loislaw* only the oblique (/) is needed with the numeral; the "w" is dropped. *Michie's Virginia Law on Disc* does not permit proximity searching with wildcards—which means this particular search would take a long time in order to search each variation of the word, and then combinations of them (whew). Simultaneous searching of Virginia Supreme Court and Court of Appeals published cases is permitted with all the electronic products except *Loislaw*. As for the search results, the hits differed with the length of coverage of each database; because there is no comprehensive collection of the opinions from Virginia's lower courts, the publishers' coverage varies.

If currency is the highest priority, the three Web-based tools, *Westlaw*, *LEXIS-NEXIS*, *Loislaw* (Web-based) and the CD-ROM, *CaseFinder*, are your best choices. *CaseFinder* includes free access to its Web site for new cases, sometimes less than a day old. *LEXIS* and *Westlaw* have the broadest coverage of legal information in Virginia. They also make concurrent searching easy and will track search time for precise client billing. The CD-ROMs *CaseFinder* and *Premise* also track your time. None of the CD-ROMs provide the depth and breadth of coverage offered by

LEXIS or *Westlaw* but for the most part they are a very good value. When choosing an electronic resource think about your priorities for research: How comprehensive does the coverage of Virginia case law need to be? What legal materials do you use most? How important is the ease of searching? And, of course, what is your budget and what are you getting for your money?

While there is much free legal information available at government agency Web sites, these should not be considered a substitute for the commercially developed electronic products. Most of the data available at the government sites is limited to information issued since the mid-1990s, print citations are not provided, search strategies vary more widely on each Web site than on the commercial products and much time can be wasted moving from site to site. It is good to be familiar with what is available on the free Web sites, as they can be very useful for current information and for material needed infrequently. When time, accuracy and ease of use are the primary concerns of an individual conducting legal research, the commercially produced electronic tools are hard to beat. ☺

(See chart on page 19.) *Virginia Legal Materials in Electronic Format*



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Virginia Legal Materials in Electronic Format: a Comparison

CD-ROMs	Va. Supreme Court Opinions	Va. Court of Appeals Opinions (Published)	Va. Court of Appeals Opinions (Unpublished)	Va. Circuit Court Opinions	Va. Code	Other
CaseFinder (\$389 per year, updated monthly)	1925-	1985-	1994-	Selected	Current Unannotated	A.G. Op. 1994- ; Workers' Comp. Op. 1985- ; Legal Ethics Op.; Federal 4th Circuit Op. 1972- ; U.S. Supreme Court Op. 1949-
Michie's Virginia Law on Disc (\$900 per year, updated quarterly)	1852-	Selected 1985-	Selected 1993-	Selected	Current Annotated	<i>Va. Rules Annotated</i> ; Legal Ethics; UPL Op.; A.G. Op. 1980- ; selected Federal cases; Additional cost for Va. Forms; Michie's Jurisprudence; Va. Model Jury Instructions, Civil and Criminal.
West's Virginia Reporter and Virginia Code (\$900 per year for fewer than 50 attys., updated quarterly)	1887-	1985-	1992- ; Incomplete 1985-1991	No	Current hyperlinks to cases; no law review citations	Va. Admin. Code (separate disk, no additional charge), A.G. Op. 1976- ; Va. Supreme Court rules and orders; Workers Comp. Op. 1980- ; Legal Ethics Op.; Tax Admin. Decisions; current Acts of Assembly. Additional cost for Va. Federal cases, Va.-W.Va. Digest and forms CD-ROMs.
Web-based						
LEXIS-NEXIS (price varies) (subscription available for use of Virginia materials only, price varies from \$105 for 1 atty. to \$880 for 11-20 attys. per month) (credit card can be used by non-subscribers for single search)	1730- (1 Va.-)	1985-	1985-	Selected	1991-	Dept. of Taxation rulings 1984- ; Tax regs. 1985- ; Va. Admin. Code; Atty. Gen. Op. 1980- ; Legal Ethics Op.; Pub. Utilities Reports 1986- ; Va. Court rules; Metro Verdicts Monthly; Bill Tracking; 4th Circuit cases; Federal District cases from Va.; Va. bankruptcy cases; jury instructions; Michie's Jurisprudence; Va. law reviews; and more.
Loislaw (available on CD-ROM updated via the Internet or Internet only) (\$498 per year, CD-ROM issued quarterly is an additional \$30 per year)	1931-	1985-	TBA	TBA	Current Unannotated	Acts of Assembly; Va. Administrative Code; Rules of the Va. Supreme Court; Med. Mal. Rules; Rules of Va. Workers Comp. Comm.; SCC rules; Va. State Bar rules; JIRC rules; Federal local rules for the 4th Circuit; U.S. Sup. Ct. rules; Federal rules of civil & criminal procedure; Federal rules of evidence.
Westlaw (price varies) (subscription available for use of Virginia materials only, max. \$600 per month for 13-50 attys.)	1887-	1985-	1992-	Selected	1987-	CCH Virginia State Tax Reporter; Public Utilities Reports 1974- ; Va. Administrative Code; Attorney General Opinions, 1976- ; Va. Court Rules; Va. Court Orders; Va. Bill Tracking; Va. Taxation Administrative Decisions, 1983- ; Legal Ethics Op., 1988- ; and more.