

In the early-to-mid 1990s, the area of personal finance software served as a bountiful oasis for the individual investor looking to monitor their financial activities. This once-deep pool has only two software programs today.

There are many reasons for the drying out of this once-fertile software industry—the high cost of converting DOS-based programs to the Windows platform, the difficulty and expense of becoming Year 2000 compliant, and the effort of keeping programs up-to-date with frequent tax law changes are just some of difficulties software vendors were facing.

Many firms have decided that it's better to migrate popular personal finance advice and tools to the Web. Sites run by mutual fund families, online brokerage firms, and even financial magazines have become major players in the field. Personal finance and financial planning are truly hot topics on the Web. The Web is now able to meet the many different personal finance needs of investors.

Personal finance programs normally have a rich set of standard accounting functions such as portfolio management and budgeting, but they cannot offer much in terms of 'real' advice or an archive of case studies or articles to read and learn from. This is where Web site purveyors come in and fill the demand, providing huge libraries of advice and easy-to-use tools to locate information. These Web sites offer breaking news, interest rate information and quotes, step-by-step guides, special reports, case studies, question and answer sessions, message boards, and links to other topic-related sites. They also provide users with searchable databases, keyword searches, quick-reference guides, and article archives and indexes. Tools normally include several different calculators, planners, and evaluation modules.

## One-Stop Shopping

The March/April 2000 *Computerized Investing* comparison article discussed the merits of the two lone players on the personal finance software roster, Quicken 2000 from Intuit and Microsoft's Money 2000 program. The article also reviewed the two companion Web sites of these programs—Quicken.com and MSN MoneyCentral. Both sites are considered comprehensive, one-stop investment centers, flagships of the investment-related Web world. The knowledge base of these sites includes personal finance advice, education and expert tools—features that fill the gaps left by their software teammates.

These one-stop investment hubs have developed beyond the standard investment-related offerings—market news, quotes, company reports, stock and mutual fund data, screening modules, and portfolio trackers. Features such as earnings estimates, analyst recommendations, technical charting functions, and complete financial planning and personal finance assistance are available.

## Designing a Game Plan

Long-term financial planning goes beyond tracking how much you spent each month in the last year for your dog's grooming services and obedience lessons. Rather, such sites concentrate on helping you with all aspects of major financial decisions that will forever affect your life and future, such decisions as buying a home or paying for college. Most importantly, the advice given at these sites is geared toward helping you live a comfortable life while developing and implementing your retirement planning strategy.

For example, consider the process of buying a new home. The personal finance segments of many of these sites will offer you aid on determining when and how to buy, access to com-

plete home listings, links to real estate agencies and lenders and insurance companies, mortgage rate quotes, and informative advice articles on issues like current long-term interest rates and primary mortgage insurance.

Education along this line helps the individual become knowledgeable enough to form a financial game plan that agrees with personal objectives and provides enough learning for the individual to make a reasonable decision in a given area—whether that is buying property or buying shares in a company.

With such decisions, the hard part is to make a reasonable assessment of your current position while trying to forecast the future. Without the necessary information, errors that appear small at the time can haunt you for a lifetime. Education is critical to success in these types of endeavors and the best sites hold the keys that can unlock the doors to greater financial success.

## The Investor Melting Pot

The Web sites and tools must be capable of dealing with many different types of investors seeking knowledge and insight on a diverse mix of personal finance issues. Very few investors are alike—some are young, some are old; some work while others are retired; many are married, yet a lot are single; some have kids, others choose to be childless. The possibilities are nearly endless and, therefore, so are the personal finance and planning needs. Likewise, a site designed to tackle such a broad spectrum must be equally encompassing in its reach and depth of subject matter.

However, no matter what type of investor you are, if you have chosen to manage your personal finances, you must become a taskmaster and a juggler, for a complex list of goals and objectives is the cumbersome baggage attached to such a choice. Areas of

concern include investments, insurance, taxes, savings, and spending habits, just to name a few. But you must also consider the impact of marriage, kids, and perhaps divorce on your financial picture. Buying cars, buying homes, and even taking vacations can add a great amount of stress to the mix. Add to that the possibility of needing to pay for college as well as planning for your retirement and the weight can make you weary.

Upon writing down a complete list of such financial concerns, it is easy to see why some investors freeze and do nothing or seek out help in handling their personal finance issues.

The following is a review of the personal finance tools you'll find today on the Web to help you along your way.

## Comprehensive Investment Sites

### MSN MoneyCentral

The Microsoft MSN MoneyCentral site, found at [moneycentral.msn.com](http://moneycentral.msn.com), is the investment and financial segment of its MSN Internet service network of sites. Free to all registered users, MoneyCentral is broken up into eight main categories: investor, banking & bills, retirement & wills, taxes, insurance, savings & spending, family & college, and real estate. We will bypass a discussion of the investor section and concentrate on the latter sections.

Each of these sections is set up in the same fashion. Well-laid-out toolbars and navigation bars line the top and left side, respectively, of each page. Today's Highlight is a feature presented at the top of each page followed by news, articles, a special report and an Ask Our Expert link. Insight articles and an interactive Quick Reference guide, customized to each page, offer advice on different categories with output in the form of step-by-step guides, tools, articles, Q&A pages, and links to related sites—a very handy feature of this site. Each section includes access to a myriad of tools including various planners, cal-

culators, and “what if” modelers.

The banking & bills section includes current bank rate quotes and links to lenders and financial providers. This section features Insight articles addressing such issues as on-line banking and credit cards. Quick Reference topics include banking services, loans, and money markets.

The retirement & wills section provides an Advisor Finder for locating a financial advisor and also contains Insight articles discussing planning for retirement, estate planning and how to design a will. This section's Quick Reference topics include 401(k)s and IRAs, living trusts, Medicare, Social Security, and wills.

The taxes area has links to recent tax law changes, forms, and a tax estimator. Two Insight articles—one for reducing your taxes and another for preparing your taxes—are available. Quick Reference topics include audits, charitable contributions, extensions, and self-employment.

Under insurance, MoneyCentral has links to auto, home health, and life insurance quotes and Insight articles on the same four topics. The same four are again a part of this section's Quick Reference library, along with

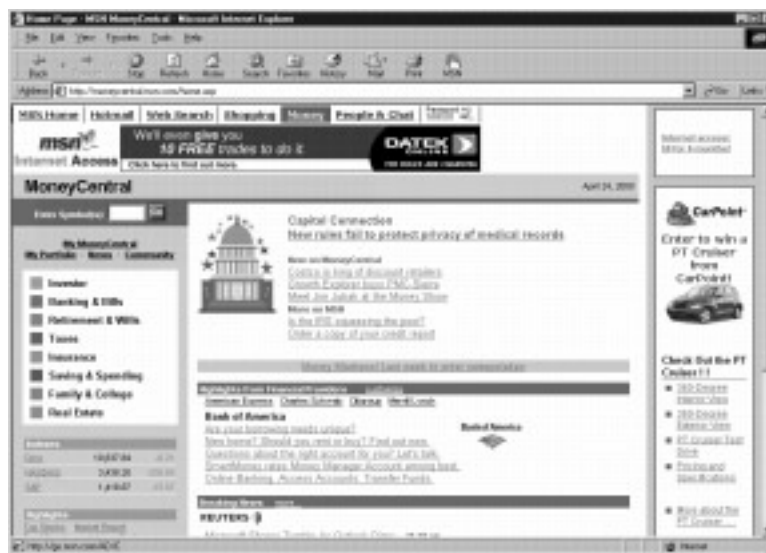
others on disability, long-term care, and liability.

Saving & spending covers saving money, managing debt, and even how to find the best deals in its Insight articles. Quick Reference topics include budgeting, car buying, fraud, and travel.

The family & college section is possibly the best section of the site—obviously, for those with a family. Here you will find college and scholarship search modules and Insight articles on family finance: children, death, divorce, marriage, and saving for college. This area also has an excellent section on kids & money, with tips on raising children, teaching kids about investing, and allowances.

The real estate section is set up differently than the others discussed so far. This section provides advice on homes and neighborhoods, getting financing, negotiating, and closing. Three sub-sections are devoted to shopping for rates, finding a loan, and additional services like furnishings, home improvement, and movers. This section also has two nice tools for finding homes for sale and determining how much you can borrow.

Figure 1.  
Microsoft MSN MoneyCentral



## S&P Personal Wealth

Standard & Poor's Personal Wealth Web site ([www.personalwealth.com](http://www.personalwealth.com)) has a small section titled Basics that is devoted to investing fundamentals and personal finance issues. For personal finance matters, the site provides several short archives of free advice articles on such subjects as saving/borrowing, taxing matters, and wealth for women. This last category includes articles written from a woman's perspective on such topics as Social Security, women entrepreneurs, and women's investing sites.

Personal Wealth also features a very useful 10-step, Getting Started retirement tutorial. Overall, the Personal Wealth personal finance settings are weak in comparison to the other sites.

## SmartMoney.com

The Web site of the magazine with the same name offers financial planning assistance at the location [www.smartmoney.com](http://www.smartmoney.com).

Here, the site's Planning tab contains a laundry list of linked pages on the various topics of concern for investors looking for advice on managing their financial future—topics run the gamut from college planning to elder care. Other primary areas of concern include: home ownership, insurance, retirement, an IRA Corner, a 401(k) Center, estate planning, and debt management.

Each area of this site offers advice articles and tools in the form of calculators and well-designed worksheets that adjust to your answers and offer feedback as you complete them. The SmartMoney site is also populated with different top five and top 10 lists that highlight concerns or items you might not think about.

The listed topics link to either information resource centers with various forms of advice or to simple article archives. However, the layout of the Planning tab's navigation bar does not tell you which is which. This is especially frustrating if you are not familiar with the magazine and its standard article content. The resource centers are a little confusing and some-

what difficult to negotiate and the breakdown of the subject matter is, at times, also hard to follow.

College planning advice concentrates on saving for college, addressing tuition costs, and determining the available level of financial aid assistance. The home ownership section concentrates not only on buying and selling a home but also living in one, discussing such topics as mortgage refinancing. The insurance section offers advice on life, homeowners, auto, and disability insurance and includes links to insurance quotes. Clicking on the link entitled retirement takes you to a special Smart Money strategies section that reviews saving money and investing money for retirement, discusses early retirement options, and highlights the impact taxes can have on your nest egg. The elder care area educates users to the basics of caring for the elderly and reviews the ways and means of paying for it.

The IRA Corner is simply a set of articles discussing popular IRA issues including Roth IRAs, withdraw penalties, and rollovers. The 401(k) Center offers education, tips, and advice on 401(k) decisions and tools for evaluating your company's 401(k) program. Another Smart Money exclusive is the

Quick Guide to Estate Planning, which, like the IRA Corner, is a set of advice articles on passing your estate on to your heirs. A tax guide has a wealth of information on everything from tax traps to investor tax breaks. Tax Matters is simply an archived set of current and semi-current tax-related Smart Money articles—which appear to be updated with each issue of the magazine. And finally, the debt management section offers advice articles and tips on managing your current debt and avoiding future debt. It also has links to tools for determining whether or not to consolidate your loans.

SmartMoney.com also has a directory of shopping centers including ones for banking, small businesses, taxes, mortgages, debt services, automobiles, real estate, and insurance quotes. These online centers are linked throughout the Planning section.

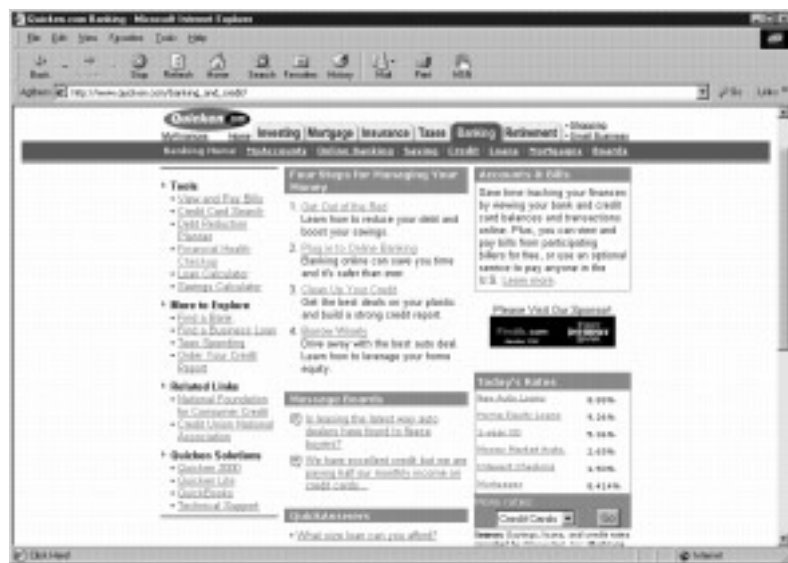
## Quicken.com

The Quicken Web site, located at [www.quicken.com](http://www.quicken.com), is a savvy old veteran—one of the first completely free, one-stop, multi-purpose investment sites. Quicken.com has a structural design similar to the MSN MoneyCentral site with six different tab segments, headlined by the popu-

Figure 2.  
SmartMoney.com Planning Page



**Figure 3.**  
**Quicken.com Banking Area**



lar stock market–concentrated investing portion. The other five sections are geared more toward personal finance concerns. They include: mortgage, insurance, taxes, banking, and retirement. However, whereas the MoneyCentral design blueprint is consistent throughout its site, Quicken.com has several different layouts.

The mortgage section is divided into four resource centers for advice on loans, home buying, refinance issues, and home equity concerns like a second mortgage. The mortgage section also has current rate quotes and links to loan interviews and pre-approvals. A toll-free telephone number for questions about loan options is also posted in this section. Mortgage tools include a payment calculator, refinance calculator, and a helpful rates-versus-points analysis module.

The insurance area has information on life, auto, health, and homeowner's insurance, as well as a section devoted to small business insurance concerns. The section has links to quotes, evaluation and planning tools, and an instant quote comparison feature.

The taxes tab offers assistance with tax filing and insights on rules. This

section has an Investor Tax Center that offers simple strategies to investors to help them minimize investment taxes and maximize overall returns. The section also features links to tax forms and publications, instructions and help, tax calculators, and the TurboTax Web site.

The banking and the retirement segments are the most robust offerings on Quicken.com. However, a few of the links are repeated and they sometimes take you to other sections of the site. This is quite frustrating and you can get lost.

The banking section lists current interest rates and has a "find a bank" function. Research on on-line banking versus traditional banking and valuable five-star reviews of on-line banking sites are provided. Banking also has advice articles and "reality check-ups" for other topics including savings, your credit, and credit cards. Under the heading of savings, Quicken.com provides articles and advice on saving for college and retirement as well as a unique discussion about saving for a wedding. In the retirement portion, the discussion centers on planning for retirement through 401(k) accounts, IRAs, and annuities, and it offers help with questions about

drawing up a will and estate planning. Various tools, calculators, and planners are interlinked between these last two sections.

## Pure Personal Finance Sites

### Bankrate.com

The Bank Rate Monitor Web site ([www.bankrate.com](http://www.bankrate.com)) has been rechristened as Bankrate.com and updated with a new look and expanded focus. Bankrate.com is a pure personal finance site dedicated strictly to the personal finance concerns of individual investors. Now, in addition to interest rates and quotes, Bankrate.com offers advice articles and analysis tools.

The front page of the site has links to current interest rates, a roster of calculators, a section of recent news articles, and an ask our financial expert section. Also on the front page is Today's High Five, a top-five list of service vendors—for example, the best deals on 60-month new car loans around the country was a recent High Five subject. An archive of past High Fives is also available.

Fifteen topic areas are found at the site including primary sections on home equity, IRAs, money markets, mortgages, on-line finance, savings, and tax information.

Home equity has a search module for finding the best rates for you within your state as well as quotes for home equity loans and lines of credit. "All about" guides and "news to use" articles on home equity concerns are also provided.

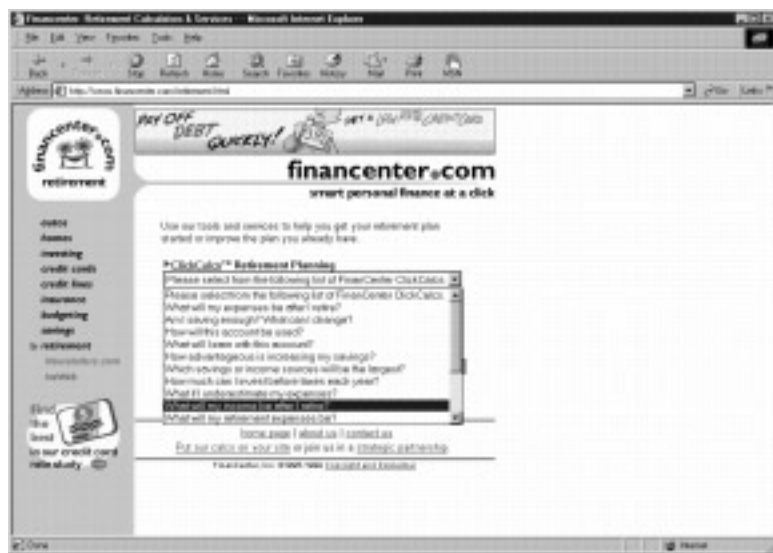
The IRA Center includes two quote functions for IRA CDs and IRA money market accounts, and a discussion on putting IRAs to work for you.

The money markets section has three search modules for finding high-yielding money market accounts and money market mutual funds, and money market accounts by state. This section also lists current averages and those from the prior month, as well as advice articles and news stories.

Mortgage has a search module for finding the best mortgage rates ac-



**Figure 4.**  
**Financenter.com ClickCalcs**



cording to your state and lists a bunch of current quotes for every kind of mortgage possible including fixed, jumbo and adjustable-rate mortgages. This area also has a nice set of mortgage-related tools and calculators.

The on-line finance section offers news and information on the developments in on-line finance—banking, brokerage, loans, mortgages, and autos. A very insightful “how useful is it?” section reporting on “the good, the bad, and the ugly” of on-line banking is also found here.

The savings page concentrates on CDs, with a search module for finding the best rates on CDs in your state and a litany of quotes for savings deposit rates.

The tax information area serves as a link to Bankrate.com’s tax sibling Web site—IntelligentTaxes.com. The IntelligentTaxes.com site has state reports with up-to-date tax laws, tax tips, news from the IRS, and advice from tax advisors. An IRS Box Score

breaks down the filing habits of those who filed this season (an example would be the number of electronic filers) and how the number differs from last year’s tax season. The site also offers links to forms, planning calendars, resources and tools.

### Financenter.com

Financenter.com takes a unique approach to personal finance with a click-by-click design concept at [www.financenter.com](http://www.financenter.com). Marketing its site as “smart personal finance at a click,” Financenter.com segments various finance categories into three main groups—ClickDeals, ClickCalcs, and ClickFacts. Each group is presented in easy-to-use drop-down menus throughout the site.

ClickDeals are links to financial services like credit cards and insurance companies. ClickCalcs are top-notch calculators and other analysis tools. ClickFacts are personal finance advice reports that evaluate the facts and

choices available to investors in the categories of automobiles, homes, and credit cards.

ClickCalcs are step-by-step guides designed around popular personal finance questions such as “Which is better for me: a fixed or an adjustable-rate mortgage?” Users enter in their information and the ClickCalc displays the results and offers additional graphs, tables, and even an explanation as to how results were derived. The last step of a ClickCalc is a page of ClickDeals.

The site has a section devoted to investing and the markets, but also has click-driven areas for homes, credit cards, credit lines, insurance, savings, and retirement.

### Broker and Fund Sites

Solid personal finance advice and excellent planning tools are also available from on-line discount brokers and mutual fund families at their Web sites—and best of all, generally it is free to everyone, not just clients and shareholders.

Major brokers, such as Charles Schwab, Fidelity, and Merrill Lynch, and mutual fund families offer personal finance advice articles and planning tools. See the April 2000 *AAII Journal* Mutual Funds column for an in-depth discussion of four mutual fund planning tools; it is available in the Web archives.

Be sure to check the Web site of your broker and the sites of any mutual funds that you own shares in to see what sort of personalized insight and education they can offer you as a customer. But also, check out the sites of others to see if they have a unique report, article, or analysis tool that might help you achieve your financial goals.

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