

# The business of being best

Pick a city—chances are this Costco member has ranked it

By Steve Fisher

YOU SEE them everywhere, popping up in newspapers and magazines and on Web sites, proclaiming the best cities in which to live, be single, get the best health care, retire, be green, etc. They are the “best places” lists, helping many to make decisions on where to live, work, travel and play.

Some come from editorial staffs, but many come from one company that specializes in finding “the best.” You might picture a huge think tank with thousands of researchers spanning and scanning the globe, but Sperling’s BestPlaces lists come from a handful of researchers, led by Costco member Bert Sperling.



Bert Sperling

Sperling’s efforts began around 20 years ago. “I saw a study saying Pittsburgh was the best place to live,” he recalls. “I thought Pittsburgh was a pretty good place, but it may not be the best place for everyone.”

He developed a software program called Places, U.S.A. that allowed people to enter personal preferences to find the best place to live for their tastes.

Then, “one of our lists showed up on the front page of *USA Today*,” recalls Sperling. “*Money* magazine saw it and asked for my help to do its own piece. We’ve been helping ever since.”

The software evolved into a Web site, [www.bestplaces.net](http://www.bestplaces.net), which features a series of interactive pages for users to search for their best place to live. In addition, Sperling’s BestPlaces produces books for John Wiley & Sons, studies for publications, corporate studies and licensed content for real estate sites.

The output is huge for Sperling and his small team. Five of them, including Sperling’s wife, Gretchen, perform data collection, processing and analysis; Web site development and design; and communication with site members. Sperling himself works with the media and business partners, and oversees the analysis. “People often express surprise at the amount of work accomplished by such a small team,” he says. “Our response: In any

organization it’s usually only four or five people who do all the work anyway.”

For a typical study, team Sperling starts by focusing on and identifying the subject, such as “The Most Liveable Costco Cities.”

“Sometimes narrower is better because it’s more understandable and direct,” says Sperling. “We then decide on the universe of the places we’ll be ranking, often using the geography of ‘metro areas,’ which more closely match how we live and work in a larger community.”

Experts in that particular subject are consulted and published works that discuss the issue are carefully culled and scrutinized. Much data comes from the government, specifically the U.S. Census Bureau, as well as other sources, such as the Bureau of Labor Statistics, Federal Bureau of Investigation, Environmental Protection Agency, the Centers for Disease Control, National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, National Center for Education Statistics and various housing groups. Sperling adds, “To a lesser extent, we go to state agencies for specific data, and license content from private organizations and data providers.

“About 85 percent is objective, 15 percent subjective,” claims Sperling. “We use our mathematical models to rank the places we study, but we continually test our results with what we’ve been hearing from residents in different parts of the country and what we read about.”

Toward that end, the Web site allows individuals to enter testimonials about their towns and neighborhoods, as well as input about the site.

“Whenever I want to know about a city area, whether for business or pleasure, I go to your site,” writes Janice Williams. “I actually have used the info on this site to purchase real estate in other parts of the country,” adds Bill Gowan.

As Sperling points out, “They’re the ultimate experts.” [E]

San Luis Obispo ranks in the top 10 cities with Costco locations, according to Bert Sperling (see below).

## The most liveable Costco cities

BERT SPERLING, along with partner Peter Sander, put together a list for *The Connection* of the best U.S. places to live, work and play that have nearby Costco locations. They evaluated more than 50 categories, including housing, economy, climate, crime, education, recreation, arts and culture, and health. Sperling says, “We strove to balance quality of life and affordability.”

1. Provo/Orem, UT
2. Bellingham, WA
3. Portland, OR/Vancouver, WA
4. Durham, NC
5. Atlanta, GA
6. Manchester/Nashua, NH
7. Boise/Nampa, ID
8. San Luis Obispo, CA
9. Northampton, MA
10. Indianapolis/Carmel, IN

## member profile

**Name:** Sperling’s BestPlaces

**Owner:** Bert Sperling

**Member at:** Clackamas, Oregon

**Employees:** Five

**Products/services:** Analyzing data about people and places for major publications, corporate studies and Web-based tools.

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**Comments about Costco:** “It occurs to me that Costco is a lot like Sperling’s BestPlaces, in that we both do a great deal of research to select the very best for our members and customers.”

—Bert Sperling