



Surfing the Web in Style

by Jill Barson Gilbert

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If you surf the Web at work, you probably use Microsoft Internet Explorer, the best-known and most widely used Web browser software on the market. However, a new generation of Web browsers is gathering a loyal following and forcing Microsoft to improve the performance of its product.

A Web browser is a software application that enables a user to display and interact with text, images, videos, music, games, and other information typically published on a page within the World Wide Web (WWW) or a local area network.

The WWW is one of several Internet applications, which also include electronic mail (e-mail), file transfer protocol (FTP), instant messaging, and news services. The WWW is the part of the Internet that most users see, in the form of billions of Web sites and Web pages, linked together by hypertext links.

Since 1994, the World Wide Web Consortium (W3C; www.w3.org) has issued more than 100 Web standards. But because all Web browsers do not comply with W3C standards, some pages look different when viewed with different browsers. You may experience technical glitches like a Web page with overlapping type, problems downloading a file, or online forms behaving badly.

Over the past 20 years, companies like America Online, Netscape, Microsoft, Apple, and Opera have introduced Web browsers. Not too long ago, Netscape Navigator dominated the market. While today Internet Explorer has the largest market share, browsers by Mozilla and Google have garnered attention (see Figure 1). Below is a review of the top contenders in the Windows PC Web browser market.

Web Surfing to Match Your Style

Find a Web browser that fits your personality and style.

Road Warrior. If you have a notebook computer and other portable gadgets like a smartphone or BlackBerry, look for a browser that offers different computer and mobile platforms and sync capabilities.

Minimalist. For a clean, straightforward browser, try Google Chrome. Or try Firefox, designed to work well for users with mobility disabilities or visual impairment.

Expressionist. If you love to customize your browser with different looks and gadgets, consider Firefox. You can download skins and add-ons straight from Mozilla.

Ad-averse. If pop-up advertisements cramp your style, consider Firefox 3.

Multilingual. If you browse in multiple languages, check out Firefox with its improved character rendering and locality-based information feeds.

Speed Freak. If you want Web pages to load fast, look for a stripped-down browser like Google Chrome or Opera.

Computer Junkie. If you have a Mac at home and a PC at work, try Firefox or Opera for the same "look and feel" on both.

Private Eye. If you want to clear your tracks after each browsing session, try Firefox and IE 8. If you want to browse incognito, try Google Chrome or IE 8.

Google Chrome

Released in December 2008, Google Chrome claims to make Web browsing faster, safer, and easier. Chrome is available for Microsoft Windows Vista and XP, with Mac OSX and Linux versions to be released in 2009 (<http://tools.google.com/chrome/>).

Download Chrome and the installer imports your Internet Explorer or Firefox settings. The browser has a fresh, uncluttered, simplistic design. The features that stand out the most are thumbnail views of Web sites most visited, search functions directly from the address bar, and the ability to surf the Internet incognito—without saving the history of sites visited—most helpful when you use a public computer.

The Chrome browser loads faster than Firefox, and combines Web address (Uniform Resource Locator, or URL) and search in one window, using your history to suggest choices. Shortcuts let you search inside other sites from the search window. Firefox lets you do this by installing specific extensions.

Chrome leverages the Google Search Engine to blur the line between content on the Web and your PC. Like other browsers, Chrome offers a private browsing mode called Incognito, Web developer tools, and the ability to restore all tabs from a previous session. Chrome also isolates tabs, so a crash on one Web page will not crash the whole browser. Internet Explorer 8 will offer a similar feature.

Mozilla Firefox 3

Mozilla Firefox is an open-source Web browser, the result of collaboration of thousands of volunteers backed by a nonprofit corporation (www.mozilla.com/firefox). Though its market share is relatively small, Firefox has a large following among tech-savvy users, and Firefox 3 has generated lots of enthusiasm. It provides the latest security features, but is faster than Internet Explorer, with more customization options.

Firefox 3 combines URL and keyword search in a single search bar. A download manager lets you resume file downloads even after restarting your computer or network connection and a zoom menu helps to resize the entire page or just the text.

Firefox 3 privacy and security measures include a new password saver, the ability to clear private data when you exit the browser, malware and phishing site blocker, and extended checking to validate "safe" sites. Even with these new features, Firefox 3 should use less memory than its predecessors and Microsoft Internet Explorer 7.

The most unique Firefox feature is the browser's ability to support add-ons, extensions, themes, and plug-ins developed by the Firefox community. If you want a different look, you can select from dozens of "skins" and simply install them through Firefox's Add-on Manager.

Opera

Opera is a stable and versatile Web browser with a small, but loyal, following. Opera started in 1994 as a research project inside Norway's largest telecom company, Telenor, and became an independent software company. The new Windows Version, 9.6, features a new browser engine, quick and customizable search functions, and a trash can that lets you open recently closed tabs. Opera offers OperaMail, a mail client built right into the browser. Like Internet Explorer, Opera offers full versions of its browser for PCs, plus mobile versions for smartphones and PDAs (www.opera.com/browser).

Internet Explorer 8

When it releases Internet Explorer 8 (IE 8) this summer, Microsoft hopes to regain some of the market share lost to Firefox and others. Experts say that IE 8 is likely the easiest to deploy and maintain over a large or small network, and its capabilities will meet or exceed those of competitors.

IE 8 is said to be more stable than its predecessors, especially for PCs using the Vista operating system. Like Firefox and Google Chrome (and IE 7), IE 8 has tabbed browsing, isolating the Web pages on different tabs so that if one crashes, the others remain intact. IE 8 is designed to improve productivity with the ability to open "web slices" or parts of Web pages from the current page, color cues for pages opened from an existing tab, and enhanced search bar features.

The most notable updates to IE 8 include accelerators that allow users to multitask within a single Web page, tabbed browsing upgrades, improved text searching capabilities, a smart Web address bar, visual search, and the ability to reopen closed Web page tabs. IE 8 also offers a page zoom feature that lays out text for better readability. Microsoft also redesigned IE to start quickly, load pages faster, and to interact better than in previous versions.

There are other options out there—try them if you can! If you find technical glitches, keep a copy of IE or Firefox handy. If your organization does not allow alternatives to IE, enjoy the new and improved IE 8 when it debuts this summer. **em**

Figure 1. Total Web browser market share (%).
Source: marketshare.hitslink.com
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