Netscape Navigator 3.0: A Web Browser Worth Its Price

Netscape's latest version of Navigator delivers speedy page-loading and multiplatform support

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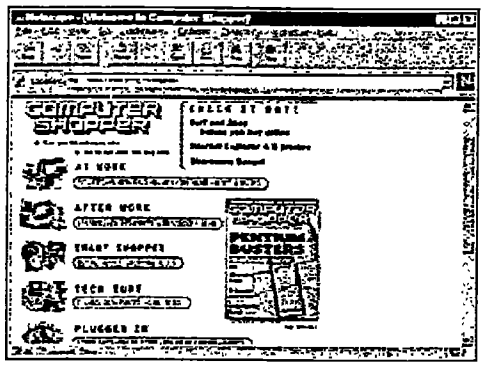
Netscape Navigator 3.0.1 (EXE 3.46 MB)



These days, surfing the Web can make you feel like a child caught between two quarreling parents. Microsoft and Netscape each want your loyalty to their Web browser--Internet Explorer and Navigator, respectively--and will sweeten the pot as much as necessary to gain it. Navigator currently owns the lion's share of the market, but Explorer is coming on strong.

With the release of Netscape Navigator 3.0, Netscape has drawn an even deeper line in the sand. This upgrade is less about enhancing usability than it is about providing technical superiority. It's not that Navigator is difficult to use--its interface has changed little since version 1.0 and remains easy to operate. Rather, Netscape aspires to functional excellence so that Navigator's $49 price tag is justifiable. Internet Explorer, you see, is free.

Choosing between them boils down to choosing the features you value most. Navigator, for instance, has fewer customization options than Explorer. You can't select which buttons appear in Navigator's toolbar, nor can you determine their order. Netscape needs to make it easier to manipulate screen elements, such as the location of the URL field and the size of display fonts.

Navigator does have one handy usability advantage. If you simply type a Web site's domain name, such as *zdnet*, it automatically figures out the full address--in this case, *http://www.zdnet.com*--and takes you there. It doesn't, however, have Internet Explorer's ability to launch simple Web searches from the address field.

Although its interface isn't very customizable, some of Navigator's other features make life easier for end users and for the computing professionals who support them. For starters, Navigator is a smaller program than its competitor, meaning it takes less time to download and less space on your hard drive. In fact, Navigator and its additional elements, such as e-mail and newsgroup clients, are only about half as large as their Internet Explorer equivalents.

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Our informal tests also found Navigator to be the quicker of the two browsers. To reach this conclusion, we loaded pages from disk rather than from the Web directly, thus eliminating the connection-speed variables that can affect loading time. The pages themselves were of varying complexity--some were more graphics-intensive than others. Overall, Navigator loaded the pages about 25 percent faster than Internet Explorer did.

MIS professionals will appreciate that Netscape offers versions of Navigator for 16 operating systems. (We reviewed the Windows 95 version.) These include Windows 3.1, Apple's System 7 for the Macintosh, and a wide variety of Unix-based systems (from vendors such as Sun Microsystems and Digital Equipment Corp.). This makes it easier to support Navigator in multiplatform environments. By contrast, the current version of Internet Explorer only works with Windows 95 and Windows NT 4.0.

A related issue is the Internet programming languages and controls that each browser supports. This technical issue has an impact on even nontechnical users, because these languages and controls allow you to view Web pages with different types of live content, such as animation and audio. Navigator incorporates a robust implementation of the popular Java programming language; so does Internet Explorer. But because Java and its related Javascript work with virtually all operating systems, users accessing the Web from any of Navigator's 16 supported computing platforms can reap the language's benefits.

A competing standard is ActiveX controls, which Microsoft is championing with Internet Explorer. Consistent with its multiplatform approach, Navigator doesn't support ActiveX, which works only with Windows. That means Navigator users can access, but not fully appreciate, Web sites that use ActiveX.

Stay Secure

Security is an important issue if you pass sensitive information, such as your credit card number, over the Net. In this area, Navigator has dueled Internet Explorer to a draw, with one potential disadvantage: Navigator doesn't support so-called code signing, which verifies the authenticity and safety of software that you download from the Internet. At press time, however, relatively few Web developers actually supported this technology.

Like its competitor, Navigator includes modules for sending and receiving e-mail, perusing Usenet newsgroups, and working collaboratively with other Internet and intranet users. Navigator's mail and newsgroup modules are tightly integrated within the browser; this means that you needn't load the mail module to have Navigator check for new messages. Also, the newsgroup reader's and e-mail clients' menu structures are virtually identical to the browser's, which lowers the learning curve. In addition, these clients employ a simple system of onscreen folders where you can drag and drop messages for storage. In the news reader, you can download groups of items--such as message threads--for offline viewing.

Navigator's CoolTalk tools enable you to collaborate with other Internet users. The module is easy to configure and operate, but it must be present at both ends of a connection. (Similar programs, like Internet Explorer's NetMeeting, have the same requirement.) CoolTalk offers a whiteboard tool for sharing sketches and ideas, and a chat tool for exchanging text messages. But it can't share applications on remote machines--a capability included in Explorer's NetMeeting.

Netscape missed an opportunity to make Navigator more attractive to its target audience of corporate users. The company offers an add-on package that allows users to customize Navigator for specific applications, but it charges for it; Microsoft offers a similar package for free.

Even so, Netscape Navigator 3.0's speed and multiplatform support make it a logical choice for corporate buyers. Individual users who surf the Web infrequently may find Navigator's abilities less compelling, though its easy availability on the Web makes it simple to try out.

All in all, Navigator remains the best Web browser money can buy.

Netscape Navigator 3.0
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Support: Live phone support 6 a.m. to 7 p.m. weekdays (PT); free for 90 days, additional support plans available
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