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June 11, 1997

Netscape's Communicator looks ready for big league

Browser improvements aren't the only crowd-pleasers in Internet client software suite

By Jim Rapoza

For those Web fans who have had to make do reading about push clients and lawsuits, we have good news: Browser season has begun. And first up is Netscape Communications Corp.'s Communicator, a heavy-hitter with robust E-mail, collaboration tools and editing capabilities that looks ready to play in more than just the browser league.

Released today, the $59 standard version of the Communicator suite of Internet client software includes the Navigator browser, the Messenger mail client, the Collabra newsreader and collaboration tool, the Conference real-time conferencing tool, and the Composer HTML editor.

Also included in the $79 Professional version are Calendar, a personal scheduling application; AutoAdmin, a feature that will help companies manage Communicator; and terminal emulation through the IBM Host On-Demand component. The Netcaster push component, which will be included in both versions, is still in beta testing.

PC Week Labs found Communicator to be a major upgrade in strength of features and in usability. Almost every component carried over from Navigator 3.0 has been significantly enhanced. Communicator also supports important Internet standards such as IMAP (Internet Message Access Protocol) for mail and LDAP (Lightweight Directory Access Protocol) for directory access. Support for JavaSoft's JDK

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1.1.2 is incomplete, but full support is promised by fall.

This being a Netscape product, Communicator also includes a fair share of nonstandard technologies, such as the company's own implementation of Dynamic HTML and layering.

Making the (up)grade

PC Week Labs tested the standard and Professional versions of Communicator on Windows 95 and Windows NT 4.0; the Unix and Macintosh versions were not yet available. We also tested Communicator on Windows 3.1 and found it to be very comparable to the 32-bit version, which is good news for companies that still have a large number of Windows 3.1 systems.

The AutoAdmin feature of the Professional version, when used with the Mission Control administration tool (which was not available for testing), will let administrators lock in certain features and ease upgrades to Netscape's new release.

The Navigator browser's interface showed several improvements, including the ability to navigate a page using the keyboard, autofill capabilities in the URL address field, and the ability to see all addresses in the Back and Forward buttons with a right-mouse click. However, all of these features are also found in the current beta version of Microsoft Corp.'s Internet Explorer 4.0 browser.

The few unique improvements in Netscape's browser include the ability to stop animations and Java applets from running in a page, and the ability to manage bookmarks by dragging and dropping pages into folders. A new dockable pop-up tool bar also lets users quickly choose from Communicator's features.

Almost all settings can be managed from a single preferences window. Security features, such as digital certificates, are managed from a separate window that is accessed from a button on the main tool bar.

Communicator supports signed Java applets, which means these applets can access system resources, but gives users control over what can be accessed. This is better protection than users get from signed

ActiveX controls, but they should still approach signed Java applets with caution.

Java performance has been greatly improved by the addition of Symantec Corp.'s Just In Time compiler. We tested Communicator using PC Magazine's Jmark Java benchmark, and it significantly outperformed Navigator 3.01. However, it came out just about even with Internet Explorer 3.0.

The improvements are in the mail

Although Communicator's better browsing capabilities are what users will notice first, the biggest improvements are in the mail client. Messenger is superior to Navigator 3.0's mail client in every way and competes very well against third-party mail clients and Microsoft's Outlook Express.

The IMAP support allowed us to maintain server-based mail, but Messenger also let us replicate mail locally so we could work on it offline. Communicator's LDAP support made it easy to find addresses in public or private directories. Messenger's support for Secure Multipurpose Internet Mail Extension allowed us to send encrypted messages.

Standard mail client features such as filtering, return receipts, spelling checking and a way to flag a message's priority are now included in the mail client. We also were able to create messages with rich text using the integrated Composer editor. And we could create a vCard digital business card to attach to messages.

As a newsreader client, Collabra has some nice new features, including the ability to search for a newsgroup without knowing the exact name. However, its most advanced features, including the ability for users to create newsgroups and give them easy-to-recognize names, are tied to the Collabra Server that Netscape will release as part of the SuiteSpot 3.0 suite of Internet servers.

Calendar focuses on scheduling features but lacks some of the personal information management features found in Lotus Development Corp.'s Organizer and Microsoft's Outlook. Calendar does do a good job of simultaneously displaying several users' calendars, without the configuration hassles

found in Lotus' recently released Organizer 97 Group Scheduling Edition.

Composer: A tune-up for Navigator Gold

Composer is essentially an updated version of the Navigator Gold Web page editor. As a WYSIWYG HTML editor, it's not bad for making quick edits, and its publishing capabilities are much better than those in Navigator Gold. Still, Composer's lack of standard features such as the ability to quickly edit HTML source code make it a poor choice for anyone doing serious Web page development.

Using Conference, we were able to conduct point-to-point audio and text conferencing and share electronic whiteboards. The component also allows one user to walk another through a browser session. However, when we set up Conference we had to re-enter all of the personal information that was already in our vCard business card.

Other Communicator features include the User Profile Manager, which lets users create profiles of Communicator that use different servers, bookmarks and general settings, so that more than one person can share the same browser. The online help, which uses Netscape's NetHelp technology, was much easier to use than the HTML-based help found in Navigator 3.0.

Netscape, of Mountain View, Calif., can be contacted at (415) 937-2555 or home.netscape.com.

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