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NETSCAPE'S NEW BROWSER IS A BRUISER

With lots of enhanced features, Netscape's latest leaps ahead of Microsoft--for now

When browsers first appeared, they did little more than display the World Wide Web's primitive text pages. But as the Web has matured, browsers have grown into powerful pieces of software. If you use the Web a lot, and especially if you depend on a corporate intranet, Netscape Communications' newest offering could be the most important application on your computer.

The enhanced browser, called Communicator, is available as a $59, 8 1/2- megabyte download from home.netscape.com. It allows Netscape to recapture the leadership it relinquished to Microsoft Internet Explorer 3.0 last year, although the Web pioneer will face a new challenge from IE 4.0 this fall.

NEW LOOK. The heart of the package is still the familiar Navigator browser. Other major pieces include Messenger, which handles E-mail and postings to Internet or corporate discussion groups, and Composer, a simple Web page editor. Netcaster, which allows Web sites to "push" updated material to desktops, is available in test form only, so I couldn't form an opinion about its value.

The first thing you'll notice when you fire up Communicator is that the general appearance of the program--which had changed little since the first version of Netscape Navigator in 1994--has been completely overhauled. At the top of the screen are three rows of icons that turn into buttons as your cursor passes over them. In a trick borrowed from Internet Explorer, you can change the size and location of these toolbars or make them disappear altogether. One welcome change is the much-improved management of bookmarks. In previous versions of Navigator, the collection of favorite sites quickly grew into an unwieldy list. When you click on the "edit bookmarks" menu item, you get a Windows Explorer-style view of

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your bookmarks, and you can use the drag-and-drop technique to reshuffle folders. Best of all, bookmarks you put into the "personal toolbar folder" appear as toolbar icons, ready for quick access.

A primitive E-mail component has long been part of Navigator, but Messenger challenges the best stand-alone mail programs. You can set up rules that will, for example, automatically delete unread junk mail from specific addresses such as cyberpromotions.com. Messenger works with any post office that uses Internet standards, including most corporate mail systems.

One of the more frustrating aspects of E-mail is trying to find someone's address. Messenger uses a new Internet standard called the Lightweight Directory Access Protocol (LDAP) that will serve as a sort of white pages for the Internet--type in a name, pick a predesigned directory, and you get a list of matches. This feature has limited usefulness today because there are only a few not-very-good public LDAP directories available, but better ones, both public and corporate, are being built.

Another strong point is Messenger's use of digital signatures, a cryptographic technique that allows the recipient to be sure that both the sender and the content of a message are authentic. Messenger can automatically add your signature to every message after you supply a password, and tells you if an incoming message has either a valid or an invalid signature. Since relatively few people have the cryptographic "certificates" to sign messages, the technique doesn't have much utility now. But use of digital signatures is growing rapidly, especially within corporations.

The big question for Netscape, which has about 70% of the browser market, is how long it can stay in front. Early test versions of Internet Explorer 4.0 not only match Communicator feature for feature but make Windows itself much more browser-like. You navigate through screens with forward and backward buttons, and the program treats files on your computer the same as Web links. Netscape will find this almost impossible to match, but it's not clear that this feature is one that most people will want. Still, consumers can only benefit as the Microsoft-Netscape competition steadily makes both products better. Let's hope the race goes on for a long time.

BY STEPHEN H. WILDSTROM

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