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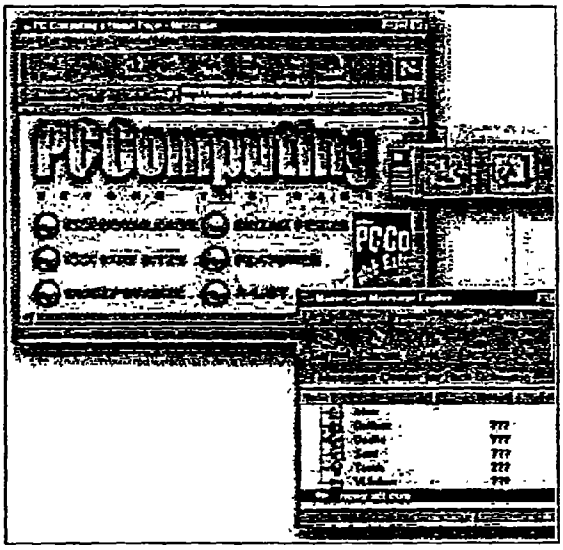
Netscape Communicator

by Rich Schwerin

Netscape's Secret Weapon
Smart businesspeople use the Internet for a lot more than Web surfing nowadays. Collaboration, text chatting, and data sharing are all commonplace. And the latest offering from Netscape makes meeting up on the Net a whole lot easier. Netscape Communicator goes way beyond basic Web browsing, blending the latest version of Navigator with four additional feature-rich components into a single, tightly integrated Internet suite--all for a mere $49.



The bundle gives you access to nearly every facet of the Internet. Videoconferencing, HTML-rich e-mailing, whiteboarding, newsgroup surfing, and text-based chatting are just a few of the things Communicator tackles.

Features

- Totally customizable and unobtrusive interface that includes a unique central taskbar
- Centralized message center
- Components work well together
- Drag-and-drop hyperlinks are available in all five components

System Requirements:
Windows 95 or Windows NT, 486 CPU, 16MB of RAM, 9MB of hard disk space, TCP/IP Internet connection, POP3 or SMTP e-mail account for Messenger, sound card and speakers for Conference.

$49 est. street price

GOVERNMENT EXHIBIT 1283

VERDICT: ★★★★★
Everything you need to communicate over the Net. Your move, Microsoft.

Netscape Communications Corp., (800) 638-7483, (415) 937-2555

All in One Communicator includes Netscape Navigator 4.0 for Web browsing; Messenger for e-mail access; Collabra for group discussions and newsgroup access; Composer for Web page creation and editing; and Conference for collaboration.

Downloading, installing, and configuring Netscape Communicator were easy, albeit time-consuming. The

full-blown version is 9MB. The good news is you need to download only one copy; a new multiuser profile feature makes it easy for several users to share the same copy without reconfiguring bookmarks, e-mail settings, or address books.

All five of the applications work well together. You can drag most data, including Web addresses, from one application and drop it into another. A floating taskbar gives you one-button access to most of Communicator's power.

Better Browsing Navigator 4.0 sports an entirely new look with completely customizable toolbars, as well as open and close tabs that let you quickly free up screen real estate. Other improvements include better Back and Forward buttons with tool tips that let you know exactly where you're headed, a combined Stop/Reload button, and a new Search button that takes you to a Netscape Web page with links to the most popular search engines. The Bookmark Quickfile lets you access, organize, and edit bookmarks quickly and easily. Also new to Navigator is keyboard navigation, an HTML-based help system, and Java performance improvements.

Web developers will appreciate other new browser features, including support for absolute positioning, layering, cascading style sheets, JavaScript style sheets, and the W3C Object tag. Developers can also finally say goodbye to the days of plug-in configuration: Navigator 4.0 automatically installs plug-ins.

Message Mania If you're an e-mail fanatic, you'll love Messenger, Communicator's SMTP/POP3-compliant e-mail component. Messenger is a great way to send and receive HTML-enabled e-mail. It includes a spell-checker, a personal address book, and support for Secure MIME, UUEncode, and Binhex, as well as other e-mail attachment formats.

Composing HTML e-mail is as easy as working in plain text. The program comes with dozens of time-savers. Type-ahead addressing, for one, automatically completes the e-mail address you're entering if it's listed in your personal address book. And there are plenty of filters and organizational tools to help you sort your messages. Want to work offline or on the road? Messenger allows you to replicate and synchronize mail files.

Come Together Communicator's built-in newsgroup reader is called Collabra. If you also purchase Collabra Server for an extra $995, you can create and manage internal discussion forums and message threads.

Collabra's Integrated Message Center is a welcome addition. It's a central interface for accessing and managing all messages--e-mail, discussion threads, and newsgroup postings--but it also requires the separate Collabra Server.

Web Weaver Gone is Netscape Navigator Gold, and here to stay is Netscape Composer, a simple-to-use Web-page creating and editing tool. If you can use a word processor, then you can use Composer to create professional-grade Web pages. If you've never designed a Web page, let Composer's Page Wizard and page templates hold your hand while creating one from scratch.

Boasting features such as image importing, table-column editing, one-button publishing, and spell-checking, Composer is tightly linked to both Messenger and Collabra. Building pages with bullets, tables, and different font sizes and colors isn't a problem, but forget about integrating live databases--that feature isn't supported in the current version of Composer. If you plan on doing some serious Web page creation, you'll be better off with something like Microsoft FrontPage 97 or NetObjects NetFusion.

Get Connected Netscape Conference, Communicator's videoconferencing tool, could reduce your travel and entertainment spending and save you time, too. Based on the H.323 standard, Conference includes a full-duplex Internet phone and WAV-file support for voice mail. With Conference's Collaborative Browsing, you can connect with and lead a passive colleague from Web site to Web site.

You also get a shared whiteboard, a text-chat tool, and file-exchange features. As of our review, Conference didn't support multiparty use, but Netscape says it will by the time you read this. And although we tested Conference across a shared T1 line, performance was sluggish, especially when using the shared whiteboard.

Professional Power Although it's not yet ready for review, Netscape has outlined features for a $79 Communicator Professional Edition, which adds two major components to the five in the Standard Edition. There's Netscape AutoAdmin, a management tool for setting up multiple Communicator users. and Netscape Calendar for event scheduling. While a demo of Calendar was impressive, the feature requires a separate server.

Our take on the beta version of Netscape Communicator is an enthusiastic thumbs-up. Netscape wisely focuses on the messaging components of Communicator--especially Messenger and Collabra--and adds a variety of useful features and enhancements. While keeping an eye on the future and Microsoft Internet Explorer 4.0, Netscape Communicator is today's elite choice for serious Internet-based communication and collaboration. And at just $49, it's also a powerful bargain

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