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Section: Channel Champions

Netscape An Easy Browser Winner -- Sweeps All Eight Areas In Survey

Jacqueline Henry

With a legal debate Raging about whether Microsoft engages in anti-competitive practices with regard to its Web browser technology, resellers responding to this year's Channel Champions survey have made their preference known unequivocally.

Netscape swept all eight survey areas to win the Web browser category of the Channel Champions reseller poll for the second year in a row.

Resellers gave Netscape, Mountain View, Calif., an overall satisfaction rating of 5.6, compared with 5.1 for Redmond, Wash.-based Microsoft. Both scores were down from last year's poll results.

Netscape achieved its widest margins over its sole competitor in two channel program areas. Netscape beat Microsoft 5.3 to 4.5 in vendor response time and 5.3 to 4.4 in technical support, margins of victory that are unusual in the Channel Champions survey.

Resellers gave Netscape its highest score in the area of product availability, where it received a rating of 6.3 out of a possible 7. The vendor also earned a very respectable score of 5.9 in product quality and reliability, upgradability and compatibility, and price/performance.

Microsoft, by comparison, received an impressive 6.2 in product availability and 5.8 in price/performance, but only 5.4 in quality and reliability, and 5.3 in upgradability and compatibility.

Netscape's lowest scores were for co-op marketing programs (a 5.0 compared with Microsoft's 4.6) and technical support (a 5.3 vs. Microsoft's 4.4).

Not surprisingly, since this product category is one in which passions tend to run high, resellers expressed enthusiastic support for Netscape's Communicator product with its Navigator browser. Clearly, Netscape has benefited from negative feelings resulting from what some resellers have described as Microsoft's heavy-handed marketing strategies.

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About Microsoft, reseller Thomas Wittman said: "I don't like their product. I don't like their attitude. I don't like the way they treat people. And I refuse to use them."

Wittman, technical supervisor for TCLS Computers Corp., Alton, Ill., a reseller specializing in academic networking, has been working with schools for 10 years. He said his Web browser of choice is Netscape because of the product's quality.

"I just like [Netscape's] product better, and the only other choice is Microsoft," he said.

"Netscape is not as cluttered and doesn't try to destroy my desktop like Microsoft does. It doesn't automatically open all push channels to my desktop, and that's what Microsoft's program does," he said.

"I want choice," Wittman continued. "I want to choose what my browser does, not have Microsoft choose what my browser is going to do. I want simplicity and stability, and none of Microsoft's products fulfill those requirements."

Rick Kohn, manager of RM Kohn Computer Consulting Service, a reseller in Lawton, Mich., uses Netscape's product as well as Microsoft's Internet Explorer. "We do 50-50 Netscape and IE," he said. Yet, he prefers Netscape.

"I think the biggest thing is ease of installation and usability for Netscape," Kohn said. "Just recently, we had a botched install of 4.0 Internet Explorer. Even with the full retail version off the shelf, it wouldn't work.

"The files to connect to the Net were damaged in the original installation, and you couldn't connect to the Net to connect the new installation. It was a Catch-22. Netscape I can count on to work when I install it," he said.

Netscape officials describe Communicator as not just a Web browser, but the company's flagship product for client desktops.

"The Communicator has gone far beyond just having the browser. It is a full-featured desktop with all of those components imbedded in it," said Ian Locke, vice president of North American channel sales for Netscape.

Locke said Communicator is now free for download, and the components most highly in demand for download are Navigator and Messenger.

"What's important to note is that the revenue contribution from our product mix through the channel has changed dramatically," Locke said. "As we continue to step up sales and marketing efforts in the desktop space, with the Communicator product, we announced that the client portion would be a no-cost product. so, in the channel, folks that were being successful continue to be so."

Netscape hopes the giveaway will increase market share and create brand

loyalty for high-end server E-commerce software and generate more visitors to its Netcenter Web site, from which Netscape receives revenue through advertising dollars and from E-commerce companies wanting to reach business users.

"With the advent of it being readily available at no cost, we're expecting our market share to continue to climb," Locke said.

He said the Communicator software historically has been a major part of the company's revenue stream, and while it no longer will have that role, its technology is no less important to the company.

"The Communicator has been the strategic underpinning of our company. That should not be interpreted that it is less important to us as a company. It is still the underpinning of every piece of technology we roll out," Locke said.

For VARs polled on the subject, good technology is the main reason for a loyal Netscape following.

"We prefer Netscape. It just seems to cause less problems. We had too many problems when someone goes to install or download IE," said Mark Johnstone, president of Gulf Coast Computer Systems, Hitchcock, Texas.

"It basically just seems to us-since we do a lot of repairs and build new units-[that] we have more people come in because they've screwed up IE than Netscape," Johnstone said.

Eddie Lund, lead technician for Loviel Computer Corp., a reseller in Eden Prairie, Minn., also is a Netscape user. "It's been the most reliable for me," he said of the company's Web browser. "It's stable. It supports the various HTML tags out there. It could be a little quicker. It seems a little slow compared to Internet Explorer at times. I like the layout of it, the buttons."

Jennifer DeMaio, marketing coordinator for Essex Computers, a systems integrator based in Clifton, N.J., is another Netscape user.

"It's what I'm used to. I've always used it. I have no complaints. I find the software very easy to use. It is very consistent," DeMaio said.

Other VARs may not be pleased with Microsoft or its products but find themselves in the old 'If you can't beat 'em, join 'em' quandary.

"I try to stick with Microsoft," said Harvey Morrow, owner of Professional Computer Services of South Florida Inc., a Coral Springs, Fla., reseller.

"I dislike it as a company. I don't think its products are top rate," but it has a real lock on the market, he said, adding, "I don't think Microsoft excels in any area except keeping the competition down."

That may be a hotly contested issue that is headed for eventual resolution

in the courtroom. For now, the debate in the channel appears to center around technical and channel program issues-where Netscape clearly comes out on top. With its wide lead in important areas such as technical support, upgradability and compatibility, response time and return policies, Netscape seems to have built up large-scale channel goodwill. Right now, many resellers seem critical of Microsoft. However, Netscape continues to excel at satisfying enough of its channel partners to make it the vendor to beat in this high-profile product category.

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