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Netscape Takes Lead in Race To Build Better Web Browser

By WALTER S. MOSSBERG

WHILE MICROSOFT Corp. and the Justice Department battle in court over the software giant's tactics in its browser war with Netscape Communications, the war itself is entering a new phase. Netscape on Monday released a new version of its Navigator Web browser, aimed at curbing the dramatic market-share gains racked up by Microsoft's Internet Explorer browser.

Nobody knows how the antitrust case will end, but the fast-paced combat outside the courtroom is likely to matter more than the protracted legal warfare, at least for the next year or two, which is an eternity in the Internet business.

If you have a question you want answered, or any other comment or suggestion about Walter S. Mossberg's column, please send e-mail to mossberg@wsj.com.

Netscape has a crisis on its hands. In 1996, the company, which pioneered the Web browser, had a market share of 80% or more. By this month, according to market research firm IDC of Framingham, Mass., Netscape's share had been roughly halved and Microsoft had grabbed the lead, if you include people who use the version of Internet Explorer that's included in America Online.

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This dramatic reversal has something to do with Microsoft's business tactics, but a big factor has been Microsoft's success in building a very good browser. This improvement in Internet Explorer, beginning with version 3.0, has forced **Netscape** into a sort of feature-by-feature trench warfare, and the two companies have periodically traded the lead in features and usability.

THIS WEEK'S new version 4.5 of Navigator and the wider Communicator software suite allows **Netscape** to edge ahead again in the feature race. The new Communicator adds some valuable new aids to browsing the Web, which **Netscape** collectively calls Smart Browsing.

In addition, the new Navigator is the first Web browser designed to closely complement a particular Web portal, or gateway to Web content. **Netscape** has set up this portal, called Netcenter, in order to earn advertising revenue. Netcenter is the latest business focus at **Netscape**, a company that keeps changing strategies.

Lisa Haney

There are two main elements to Smart Browsing. The first, called "keywords," is designed to spare users from having to recall and accurately enter complex Web addresses. With keywords, you just type in the name of a company or organization, and Navigator makes an intelligent guess about the site you want and takes you there, automatically entering the proper address. It does this by invisibly consulting a database of names and Web addresses that resides at **Netscape** headquarters.

For example, if you type in "United Airlines," Navigator takes you to the big airline's site, even though you didn't know the address is www.ual.com. It assumes you don't mean just any airline, or any site with "united" in its name. If the new Navigator considers your words ambiguous, it will bring up a search results page, as in older browsers. It makes mistakes, but in general it's a boon.

The second main component of Smart Browsing is a button called What's Related, which pops up a list of links to sites considered similar to whatever page you're viewing. Thus, if you're at the New York Times site, Navigator will list links to The Wall Street Journal and Washington Post sites, among others. Once again, Navigator performs this feat by consulting a database at **Netscape**, which is based on the work of a company called Alexa that offers a similar add-on product.

That's not to say there aren't plenty of oddities in the What's Related lists. For instance, the Washington Post site was somehow deemed similar to the Houston Chronicle, but not to the Post's archcompetitor, the New York Times. But the feature is still useful.

There's another potential downside: Such a browser could rig the keywords or the lists of related sites to send users to the sites of its business partners. Or, it could force users to plow through the Netcenter portal to get results. If that were true, I couldn't recommend the new Navigator. But I found no evidence of rigging and no forced march through Netcenter.

NETSCAPE CAME close to the line in a couple of cases, but didn't cross it, in my view. When the keyword feature brings up search results, that page bears the Netcenter logo and some links to Netcenter, but it's not intrusive. And, in some cases, the What's Related lists include links to Netcenter features, which are always placed at the top, in hopes you'll go there. But this plug is separated from the main list and isn't confusing. Furthermore, Netscape's Web site offers a written promise that it won't collect information about the keywords you type in, or the sites you visit.

Beyond Smart Browsing, Netscape's new Communicator also features a much improved e-mail module, called Messenger. It has added the ability to quickly view messages without opening them, and does this better than Microsoft's Outlook Express. It also is better than the Microsoft product at automatically completing e-mail addresses you start to type. But it still lacks the ability to check multiple e-mail accounts in one sweep, as Outlook Express does.

Naturally, Microsoft isn't sitting still. It is already planning an answer to Smart Browsing in the forthcoming version 5.0 of Internet Explorer. Microsoft aims to pack this product with some of the automation and intelligence featured in its Office applications, such as the ability to correct spelling errors on the fly, as you type.

For now, though, **Netscape** has edged back into the lead on browser features, whatever happens in the courtroom.

- For answers to your computer questions, check out my Mossberg's Mailbox column in today's Tech Center.

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