



Rest in peace?

THE MOZILLA MASSACRE

As of August 2002, Netscape's global usage share had dropped to 3.4%, down from 13% a year earlier, and from 32% in 1999, according to a report from web analytics tools and services company WebSideStory. Microsoft's Internet Explorer (IE), meanwhile, continues to climb, and now has a global usage share of 96%, up from about 87% in 2001.

"The browser war [was] in fact a massacre," says Geoff Johnston, VP of product marketing for WebSideStory. "The newest versions of Netscape have failed to win over users." Unless Netscape's owner America Online makes a move soon and changes the base of its interface from IE to Mozilla, Netscape may find itself battling against Opera for the last 1% to 2% of the market.

It is a fall from grace unprecedented in the technology industry. The default web browser in the few years following its 1994 launch, Netscape has now lost all but a paltry 3% of its former market ubiquity, having been overwhelmed by Microsoft's Internet Explorer. Now major software suppliers – and, by corollary, their IT customers – are dropping it altogether, leading to the question: Is Netscape dead within the enterprise?

Some vendors certainly seem to think so. David Sandel, vice president of the business intelligence products group at data access, delivery and analysis software company Information Builders, says the company no longer supports the Netscape browser, despite its best efforts. "Just about anything that uses new technology works fine on Internet Explorer. Unfortunately, that is not the case with Netscape. So we've been telling all our customers to focus solely on Internet Explorer."

With Internet Explorer (IE) commanding a 96% share of the market, IT organisations have also wound down their support for Netscape on their external web sites. In the financial services sector alone, companies such as Capital One, NatWest and Woolwich have abandoned support for Netscape's latest version in their online banking facilities.

Most organisations that adopted Netscape (either as their preferred browser or as an alternative to Explorer), chose Netscape 4, the last version to emerge before the eponymous company was acquired by America Online in late 1998 for \$4.2 billion. But the way it displays pages that have not been tailored to cope with its quirks remains highly at odds with every other browser on the market.

Others, such as Opera, Internet Explorer 6.0 and Mozilla, support the vast majority of the standards designed to ensure web pages display pretty much the same way everywhere, allowing for variations in fonts, screen size and so on.

Tailoring web content for every single browser, on every single platform is almost impossible with limited resources. Many software companies faced with this choice now write their code either just for Internet Explorer for Windows or to comply with standards so it will display the same on most devices. The upshot is that Netscape 4.0 has been removed from the list of supported browsers for anything except the most basic content.

Of course, Netscape has moved on from that. Version 6 was a rewrite of the product from the ground up and, along with Netscape 7, has done little to change the shape of browser demand. It is based on

Mozilla, the open source browser platform that evolved following Netscape's decision in early 1998 to release the browser as freely available source code.

Netscape 7 dispenses with backwards compatibility with version 4 in favour of standards compliance. On the face of it, this suggests Netscape has been put on a level playing field, but a number of factors have stopped that happening.

For one, Windows includes IE by default, while prospective or upgrading Netscape users have to download and install the browser onto their machines. In a corporate setting, where stability is key, every additional application installed on the desktop brings more support calls and increases fault correction time. IE is also integrated into Windows and shares many components with the operating system. Netscape does not, so uses more memory.

But browsers display more than just text and pictures. Ever since Netscape introduced its plug-in architecture, companies have extended browsers to read new file formats, play multimedia and even perform more complicated tasks such as virus-checking. Microsoft's decision to use COM objects (re-branded as ActiveX controls) to build Windows and as the basis of IE's plug-in architecture mobilised web programmers familiar with Windows development to its side. Developers choosing between IE and Netscape had little option given IE's dominant market share.

Netscape's reliance on open source development has also caused it to lag behind IE in adopting less web-specific standards. Information Builders' Sandel says that while Netscape does support Java and XML in its latest releases, they are either not the latest versions or have bugs in their implementations that prevent them from working properly. "Since Netscape is open source, it's very difficult to talk to anyone to get corrective action. It's not like in the old days when it was a real company. There's little work done in testing. It's not a quality product."

With little to differentiate Netscape from Internet Explorer other than its open source development process, demand for the Netscape browser is still only likely to shrink within the enterprise. Its lack of integration with the underlying operating system, different plug-in architecture, technology lag, and lack of technical support, are just too many obstacles for software companies – and indeed IT organisations – to deal with. In short, Netscape faces extinction within the enterprise.

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From ubiquitous to negligible in six years: Is Netscape dead in the enterprise?