

Microsoft IE7 Is a Strong Response to the Firefox Challenge

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Microsoft is often at its best when facing a strong competitor. With Internet Explorer 7, Microsoft is a "fast follower" of competing browsers like Firefox, but it also offers several innovations.

NEWS ANALYSIS

Event

On 18 October 2006, Microsoft released the Internet Explorer 7 (IE7) browser for Windows XP Service Pack 2, Windows XP 64-bit Edition and Windows Server 2003 Service Pack 1. Windows customers can download IE7 at <http://www.microsoft.com/ie> . Microsoft will also begin distributing IE7 via automatic updates in November 2006.

Analysis

The Internet Explorer (IE) user base eroded in recent years as users migrated to alternative browsers, primarily the Mozilla Foundation's Firefox, but also Apple Safari and Opera. This migration was driven by a lack of desired features and a security gap resulting from years of inattention on the part of Microsoft to browser development, as the vendor's resources were diverted to other projects, such as Vista and Office. IE7 is a necessary and sufficient response that will stanch the flow of users away from IE, although it is not likely to win back a significant number of users who are already using alternative browsers like Firefox.

IE7 offers an improved user interface, including tabbed browsing, integrated search, RSS and scalable views. Some of its features match Firefox's capabilities; in a few cases — such as RSS — IE7 features surpass those offered by the core Firefox browser. But the Firefox Version 2 release is about to emerge from beta status, making it a moving target. Firefox also boasts a large ecosystem of developers that provides numerous plug-in to extend the core functionality of the browser into different areas.

IE7 also offers significant new browser security features, and should have fewer vulnerabilities in the long run compared to Internet Explorer 6, despite a vulnerability already being reported within hours of the official release. The new browser contains a large amount of new code, which, for most software packages, is likely to lead to a new crop of bugs and security vulnerabilities. With IE7, the risk of these anomalies is tempered by the long beta cycle and by a more rigorous development process.

We believe features included in IE7 will likely be sufficient to convince IT managers that have been considering a change to a non-IE browser to reconsider. The migration to Firefox had already slowed as usage moved beyond the early adopter segment, due to the structural advantages offered by the IE ecosystem. In practice, non-IE browsers were rarely adopted by entire organizations, but within some organizations, a near-majority of the most technically adept individuals chose to use alternatives like Firefox and Opera.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Organizations using older versions of IE should strongly consider an upgrade to IE7. Organizations running versions of Windows on which IE7 will not run should consider either an OS upgrade, or migration to non-IE browser such as Firefox and Opera.
- Individuals and organizations that have already switched to non-IE browsers should not feel compelled to switch back
- Organizations that develop or deploy Web applications should follow Gartner's long-standing recommendation to take a "browser-agnostic" approach.

RECOMMENDED READING

- "Firefox Usage Will Grow Until Microsoft Chooses to Respond" — Despite other browser vendor's agendas for the near term, Microsoft is the major force that will determine the outcome of the "browser wars." **By Ray Valdes, David Mitchell Smith and Whit Andrews**
- "Design Web Applications for Standards, Not for Browsers" — Newly supported standards have made decisions regarding whether to optimize for the Firefox or Internet Explorer browsers moot. **By Ray Valdes and Whit Andrews**

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