

PUTTING IT ALL TOGETHER

Souped-up Web browsers offer chat, e-mail and more

Frances Katz - Staff

Sunday, September 24, 2000

Welcome to the era of the mega-browser.

You may be thinking: "What on earth is a mega-browser, and why would I ever want or need one? My trusty Netscape or Internet Explorer browser works just fine, thank you very much."

But mega-browsers from big guns like Microsoft (which rolled out its MSN Explorer Browser earlier this month) and smaller companies like Norcross-based Ultrabrowser are one of the hottest Web trends. The companies are hoping this new breed of one-stop browser will foster Web loyalty that will last a lifetime.

The idea is to provide one-stop shopping for busy Web users or newcomers who don't have time to read up on all the Web has to offer. These new browsers tuck almost every Internet task into one neat package: Surfing, searching, instant messaging, shopping, news and e-mail, audio, video and eventually phone service are all there.

All you have to do is download and go. The idea is to develop a loyal audience that will keep coming back. That translates into money because the more users any site or product has, the more advertisers it attracts and the more money it's possible to make.

Netscape is also hoping to develop user loyalty with its latest browser --- Netscape 6. It will incorporate many features of popular parent America Online. Among other things, Netscape 6 will provide continuous and customized news updates automatically "pushed" to the user as well as links to AOL's instant-messenger software.

Taking a slightly different tack is super-portal Yahoo. Yahoo has a new product called Yahoo Companion that will customize your current browser with a Yahoo toolbar that contains the links you specify.

"Y Companion" will download a toolbar and hook it into your current browser. If you are a Yahoo registered user, you can also import other sites you've bookmarked and have them turn up on the toolbar.

This new crop of browsers is an attempt to create what is known as "stickiness." Remember when search engines just searched the Web? There was a time when Yahoo, Lycos and the other major portals had one purpose: helping users find what they were looking for elsewhere on the Web.

Then Web-measurement firm MediaMetrix developed data, later supported by competing firm Nielsen/NetRatings, that users were typing in search data, getting the information they wanted and then leaving the sites so fast they were leaving virtual skid marks. If you look at any of the major portals, you find a variety of things to do there from checking the news to downloading music and even keeping an

online appointment calendar.

The Microsoft Network online service was first out of the gate with its super-browser called the MSN Explorer Browser. Although it's still in the development stages, it can be downloaded at the MSN Web site (www.msn.com).

"Why did we do this?" MSN Explorer's group program manager Hillel Cooperman said to a skeptical group of analysts and reporters at a demonstration in New York. "To get to the next level, this is what it's going to take."

Cooperman and his bosses at Microsoft already know that developing software --- whether for the computer or the Internet --- is what Microsoft is all about. Unlike Atlanta-based EarthLink or AT&T's WorldNet, it knows the core business is not access, it is giving consumers something useful and engaging to do once they get to a site.

Like most Internet service providers and anyone else focused on catching up to AOL in terms of both subscribers and revenue, MSN is targeting new computer and Web users who know they need to be online but don't know exactly how to do it.

"The online experience isn't simple," Cooperman said. He said three out of 12 users can't get online because they literally cannot navigate the installation process. Research based on the old MSN network showed that four out of 12 users gave up when trying to install the software.

MSN developed its new browser with a sharp eye on AOL. With AOL at 25 million members, even its most bitter rivals are forced to concede it is doing something right. "AOL has been a pioneer at integrating services," Cooperman said. "People on AOL take the Web for granted because AOL has harnessed everything into one place."

So why reinvent the wheel? Microsoft has already built a suite of Web sites and applications including Hotmail, HomeAdvisor, Carpoint and MSN Money, which are considered to be among the top sites in their respective categories.

However, Cooperman says the "a la carte approach" doesn't work for everyone. While some users don't mind surfing the Web to find and bookmark the sites they want, other people --- and many of the 25 million AOL users would be in this group --- like having everything prepackaged for them.

MSN Explorer is a browser that users can download and install for free. It looks like Microsoft's conventional browser, the Internet Explorer, but it also includes a personal start page users can customize. From there you have one-stop access to your Hotmail or MSN e-mail account, local weather and links to all the MSN properties.

Also included in the package is Windows Media, an audio and video player that lets users listen to music or watch streaming videos while they work. There's a music icon on the toolbar that lets users select from hundreds of radio stations all around the world. Newbies will appreciate how easy it is to use, while veterans will appreciate not having to hunt for software or download information.

Even though the MSN browser is still in development, don't be afraid to download it. It works well, appears to be bug-free and doesn't reconfigure any of the settings already on your computer. It's also attractive and fun to use, even for grizzled vets.

The collection of information and integration of Web applications makes going online a lot easier for new users and old-timers alike.

There's no hunting around for software plug-ins or being overwhelmed with windows, buttons and strange new terms like "keyword" or "IM." You can start listening to music or writing e-mail the minute you log on. You can also register for MSN's Passport service, which remembers your user name and password so you don't have to as you travel across MSN sites and others that use the Passport system.

MSN has also customized the browser to reflect the city you live in. New York users get a nice shot of the Manhattan skyline, while Atlanta users get to see their own personal skyline. It's a small thing but does personalize the Web. Also included in the service is the MSN messenger, and a phone service is on the way. Users can purchase Internet access from MSN directly, or they can just use MSN Explorer with any ISP they currently have instead of launching a conventional browser.

Lydia Loizides, a Web technology analyst with Jupiter Communications, says the MSN Explorer is not AOL, but it's not a Web browser, either.

"You can't really call it a browser," she says. "It's inherently different. The browser is in the background. They are delivering a new kind of user interface and trying to make things as simple as possible for somebody coming fresh onto the Web who doesn't want to fuss with a whole lot of windows."

At the MSN demonstration in New York, the company went to great pains to show how many windows it might take to get something done on AOL. No windows burst open with MSN Explorer.

Personalization that really makes a browser look like it was built just for you is also the goal of a Norcross-based firm called Ultrabrowser.com. Ultrabrowser is hoping Web surfers are tired looking at the big Netscape "N" or the little Microsoft icon twirling around in their browser windows.

"What we've done is create an Internet environment," says Yassine Sbiti, the company's founder, interim president and chief executive. "We've incorporated a search engine, directories, access to TV and radio and an area you can customize."

You can download a plain "vanilla" version of Ultrabrowser right now at its Web site (www.ultrabrowser.com). Ultrabrowser's goal is to customize its product for companies and organizations all over the world.

For example, a university might have Ultrabrowser design a browser with the school's logo that it will distribute free on its home page or via CDs given to students, alumni and others. The "skin" or on-screen appearance will be tailored for an institution or company, and the start page will always be the company's home page.

Sbiti says the schools, companies and organizations distributing Ultrabrowser bring a new dimension to branding on the Web. "It's a different thing entirely," he says. "You used to be a Web site. Now you're a browser."

What both these new mega-browsers want to do is attract loyal users and hold them. MSN is hoping its suite of sites and services will win hearts. Ultrabrowser is hoping the idea of a personalized look and feel combined with services will entice users. For Yahoo, an ever-present toolbar will generate more users than the Web site alone. As for Netscape, just looking a little bit like AOL will go a long way toward holding on to its users.

Jupiter's Loizides said loyalty is the name of the game when it comes to customer retention.

"MSN is trying to build relationships with the client and the Internet, and they're betting you'll invest all this time in the site," she said. "They're hoping you won't want to take all the photos you've uploaded to

your personal photo albums and take them to another site."

While these sites may build loyalty, it could still be too little too late if MSN or anybody else wants to catch AOL, she believes:

"They are so far ahead. Does that mean there's no hope of MSN or anyone else catching up? This may not be the golden arrow that's going to get them up to AOL's numbers. But if they can parallel the types of services AOL has, then they are on an even playing field. And if you have a great interface and have all the features rolled up into one place and boom it's right in front of you, that's something."

MEGA-BROWSERS NOW AVAILABLE

Some of the mega-browsers around are preview versions, so if you are uncomfortable downloading software that remains a work in progress, you might want to wait.

MSN Explorer Browser (www.msn.com): The latest incarnation of the Microsoft Network is a free, downloadable browser that includes local news, a personalized start page and integrated Hotmail, Windows Media and other applications. It's still in its preview version but works well and is also visually appealing.

Ultrabrowser (www.ultrabrowser.com): The final release is available at the company Web site. The version you'll get is generic, but customized versions for sports teams and other "affinity groups" are on the way. Like MSN Explorer, Ultrabrowser also provides one-stop shopping - but minus e-mail, chat and instant messaging.

The developers say those features should be coming soon.

Netscape 6 (www.netcenter.com): Also in a preview version, it's more like a traditional browser with extra features added. Its "sidecar" function delivers customized news and information to users and will take up less space on your computer compared with larger browser programs like the traditional Internet Explorer.

Yahoo Companion: (www.yahoo.com): Available only for PCs, it's a toolbar that attaches to your existing browser. Users can customize it with their favorite Yahoo features.

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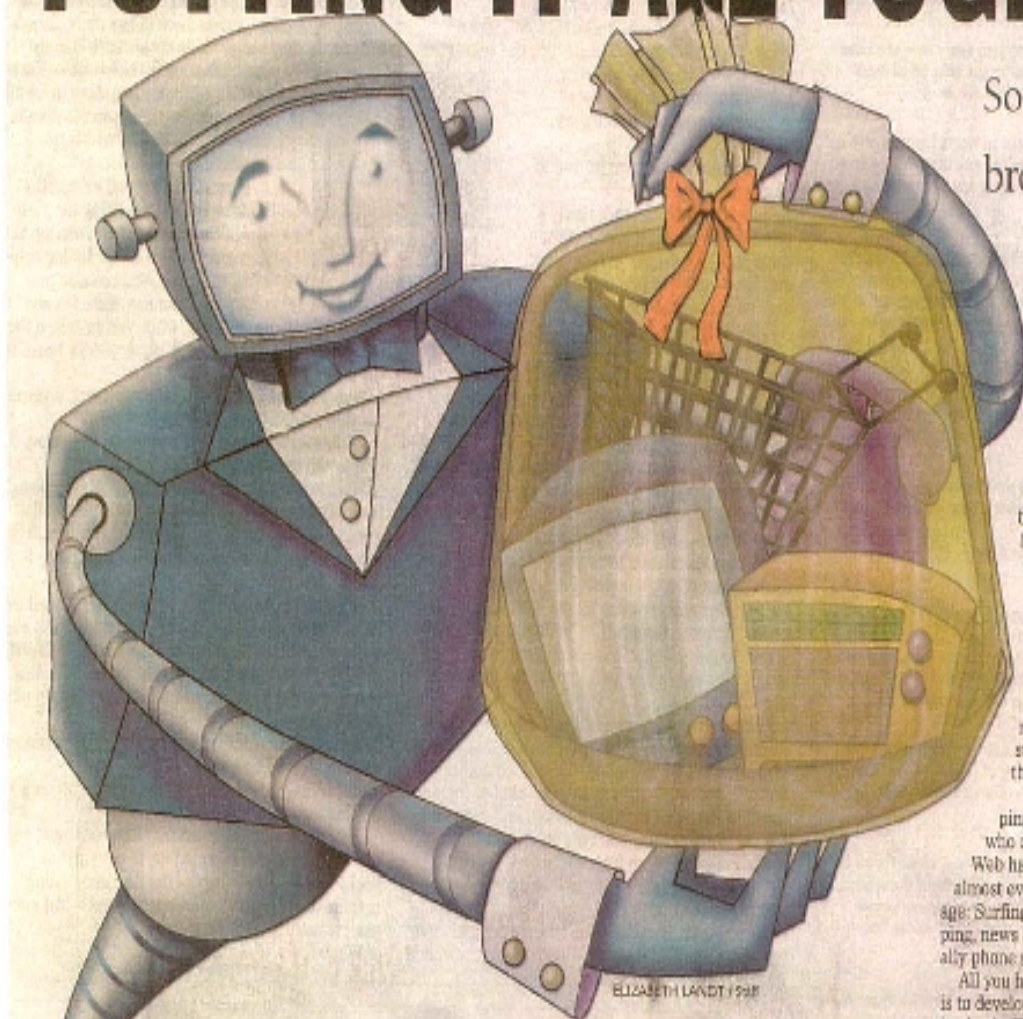
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ELIZABETH LANDT/199F

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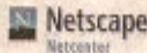
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