

# Race is on in browser wars as users' habits shift

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When Dawn Shrum was in college a few years ago, her one and only Web browser was Microsoft Internet Explorer. Boy, has her browsing changed since then.

The 26-year-old online marketing analyst for Itron, a smart-metering company in Spokane, Wash., now often uses four at once: IE; Google's blur-fast Chrome; non-profit Mozilla Foundation's Firefox; and Apple's Safari, when on her Mac.

The same is true with Eric Timm, 34, a senior network architect in Madison, Wis. Chrome is his preferred choice. IE is his default browser at work. For maximum use of the Pandora Internet-radio service, Timm prefers Firefox. And he uses Safari on his [iPhone](#).

"It's refreshing to get different views, since I'm on a browser eight to 10 hours a day," Timm says, chuckling.

Shrum's and Timm's changes in habit reflect a significant shift in how millions of Americans use browsers to traverse the Internet for information, pictures and video. A decade ago, the [Web browser](#) market was a two-horse race between Microsoft's [Internet Explorer](#) and Netscape Communications' Navigator. (We all know who won.) Today, it's a crowded field. Microsoft is still No. 1, but its lead in market share faces challenges from Mozilla, Google, Apple and others.

Indeed, every few weeks, there seems to be a major browser

announcement. This week, Flock beefed up its social-networking browser by upgrading its speed and adding LinkedIn, a popular networking site used by 85 million people.

Earlier last month, start-up RockMelt - the brainchild of former Netscape Communications employees and financially backed by Netscape co-founder Marc Andreessen - launched to glowing user reviews. At about the same time, Google delivered an update to Chrome that is faster and more secure, and does a better job of reading digital files.

Not to be outdone, new versions of IE and Firefox are due early next year.

"There are more good options to browse the Web than ever (before) for consumers," says Al Hilwa, an analyst at market researcher IDC. "The choices may be confusing, but they ensure that various needs are attended to."

The abundance of choice, he says, is the byproduct of several factors: the changing nature of Web use by consumers, the dramatic rise in smartphone sales, a wide-open browser market and constant innovation.

"The emergence of new mobile and tablet platforms (iPad) is disruptive, and Microsoft will not be able to play in that space without successful" products of its own, Hilwa says.

Browsers remain one of the Internet's most crucial functions, Gavin says. They are the windows to the Internet, conduits to what users really want to see - be it a social network, application, video or document.

"The browser has become the primary way we all keep up with our friends," says Eric Vishria, CEO of RockMelt, which centers its searches

on social-media gathering places such as Facebook, Twitter and Google. The product, which hopes to attract 1 million users within six months, was built with Chromium, the open-source browser project that underlies Chrome.

"It has become the primary way to consume news and information," Vishria says. "And it has become the primary way to search for everything."

Consumers are willing to switch to the latest and greatest browser if their current one doesn't measure up: Some 500 million people have switched browsers the past three years, based on data from W3C Counter and International Telecommunications Union.

Many people use multiple browsers not only for optimum online performance but out of necessity. Several financial institutions don't work well with Chrome or Firefox, forcing their online banking customers to use older, less secure versions of IE.

"Without a doubt, there is more choice than any time in history - and that's great for consumers and developers," says Ryan Gavin, who heads IE's business.

The latest IE, version 9, is "faster, cleaner and makes the Web feel more like a native (application) on Windows," he says.

He expects it to quickly become the most popular flavor of IE, which still dominates the browser market.

Multiple versions of IE - versions 6, 7 and 8 - each continue to draw millions of users.

IE may still be browser king, but its lead is shrinking amid competition

from all corners in a mad scramble.

As of October, Microsoft IE owned 59 percent of the global market for browsers, followed by Firefox (23 percent), Chrome (8.5 percent), Safari (5 percent) and Opera (2 percent), according to Net Applications. As recently as 2003, IE commanded more than 90 percent of the market. But it dipped below 50 percent for the first time in September, data collected by Web analytics firm StatCounter show. Microsoft says those data are flawed, and analysts generally side with Net Applications' numbers. Regardless, IE's share has declined.

A major reason for the shift is the upheaval in the computing landscape. No longer can Microsoft lean on its Windows operating system, where more than 90 percent of all businesses and consumers congregated more than a decade ago. Many have shifted to competing platforms, such as Apple and Facebook, and to mobile devices, Hilwa says.

"Where there are level playing fields in tech, and no tie-ins to monopolistic practices, a number of competitors can survive," Bob Lisbonne, a former Netscape executive and a Mozilla Foundation board member, said in a dig at Microsoft. Lisbonne now is CEO of Pixazza, whose technology lets users mouse over a photo and find out information about products in the picture.

The evolution of websites - from text-heavy to graphics-rich in the mid-2000s - has also prompted consumers to demand faster, more flexible browsers to synchronize bookmarks across multiple PCs, and for optimal graphics and video.

"Browser performance started to matter again," says Ian Fette, a senior product manager at Google.

There were two seminal moments: In late 2004, Firefox, a faster, more

stable product, arrived. In 2008, Chrome launched. It was even faster. (In May, Google said Chrome has more than 70 million users, up from 30 million a year ago, and it agrees competition is breeding better browsers.)

With IE facing stiffening competition - and in danger of abdicating its long-held position as the browser used by a majority of the world's desktop users, StatCounter says - browsers are in their most intense cycle of innovation since Microsoft vanquished Netscape in the 1990s.

The ripe market is underscored by specialized browsers such as RockMelt and Flock, products that appeal to strong computing platforms (Microsoft, Google and Apple) and an open-source darling, Firefox.

What is more, companies such as Flipboard, maker of an iPad app designed to create "social magazines," liken their products to browsers.

Then there is Opera, the No. 1 browser in Belarus, Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan.

Its Opera Mini product relies on powerful computer-server technology to compress Internet data before displaying them on a mobile device. Combined, the various versions of Opera browsers have more than 140 million monthly users.

Still, can the market support so many players?

Opportunities abound, thanks to an explosion in Internet users worldwide and the increased use of smartphones to browse the Web. Indeed, by 2015, the mobile Web will outpace the desktop Web, according to a Morgan Stanley report.

In an age of specialization and geographical preferences, the browser

market will keep growing, says Garrett Camp, co-founder and CEO of StumbleUpon, a video-discovery search engine used by more than 12 million registered users.

"I'm not sure if there is (a limit)," adds Mike Shaver, vice president of engineering at Mozilla.

"There are lots of people on the Internet and lots of different ways to use the browser. I see a continued upswing for a while."

For example, Jessica Foote often uses three browsers at once: Flock for social media because of its tabs and Twitter and Facebook feeds; Firefox for research; and IE "just because. It really helps to keep things organized," says the 33-year-old tech publicist in Portland, Ore.

The dizzying pace of innovation has prompted [Google](#) and Firefox, among others, to assiduously update their browsers every few days to keep up with what users want.

By contrast, the onus is on Microsoft IE users to download an entirely new version, though minor upgrades to security and other features occur automatically.

"One downside of having a browser as part of the OS is you can't change it quickly," RockMelt's Vishria says. "We can update our browser within days."

Each new feature, regardless of whom it comes from, pushes its rivals to play catch-up and match it, Shaver says.

Mozilla, as an appetizer to Firefox 4 next year, last month released to developers a new beta version. It boasts a new interface, Firefox Sync, to seamlessly share browsing history across PCs and mobile devices, and

3-D graphics.

"One of our proudest moments was getting Microsoft to (come out with an improved) IE 7" (to succeed IE 6) to match the performance of features in Firefox, Shaver says. "In the end, we helped users."

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