

Web sites get cool with Ajax or die

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By this time next year, Web sites not developed using the Ajax technique "will simply not be cool enough to use," an Internet analyst said Tuesday.

"(Ajax is) the latest fashion in Web design," said David Mitchell Smith, vice president of research firm Gartner, at Gartner's annual regional conference in Tel Aviv.

The good news for businesses that want to employ Ajax: "It's no longer just for rocket scientists. A few years ago you needed to invest a lot of money" to create Ajax Web sites, Smith said, "but now there are toolkits available."

That makes it the "easiest and quickest attention-getting visual" for a Web site, Smith concluded.

Ajax, a term coined around 2005, is shorthand for Asynchronous JavaScript and XML. It's not a technology in itself, but refers to using a group of technologies together. Basically, according to Gartner research, it is the aesthetic feature leading the second wave of the Internet revolution, commonly referred to as Web 2.0.

Can't picture it? Think of navigating your desktop. If you want to put a file in the recycle bin, you just click, drag and drop. To achieve the same results on most Web mail sites today, you have to highlight the file and press delete -- there's no way to drag items around.

But there is with Ajax. "It looks like a rich-client application," Smith said. "There's no wait (while the Web site reloads) -- just drag and drop."

If you have Gmail, however, you know what Smith is talking about. Google's e-mail site, along with Google Maps and the Yahoo! Mail beta version, have already employed the Ajax technique.

"One cool thing is that it threads messages very clearly," said new Gmail user Dave Roggeveen Byrne, 25, of Connecticut.

"Let's say there are five messages that have gone back and forth between three people with (carbon copies), or just 'reply alls,'" he said. "You can hide or show any of the e-mails in that set without refreshing."

"And even if there are five e-mails, you only show, for instance, the second one and reply to that e-mail 'directly.' A little box will show up stating that your message has been sent," Byrne said.

The major drawbacks to Ajax can be divided into three categories: usability, response-time concerns and JavaScript, according to Wikipedia.

"One major complaint voiced against the use of Ajax in Web applications is that it might easily break the expected behavior of the browser's back button," the online encyclopedia said. "Users generally expect that clicking the back button in Web applications will move to their last page loaded, and in Ajax applications this might not be the case."

It may also be difficult to bookmark a particular section of an Ajax site, Wikipedia said.

"While no browser plug-in is required for Ajax, it requires users to have

JavaScript enabled in their browsers," the encyclopedia continued in its "cons" section.

"This applies to all browsers that support Ajax except for Microsoft Internet Explorer 6 and below. These additionally require ActiveX to be enabled, as the XMLHttpRequest object is implemented with ActiveX in this browser. Internet Explorer 7, however, will implement this interface as a native JavaScript object and hence does not need ActiveX to be enabled for Ajax to work," Wikipedia said.

Outlook Web Access and Desktop.com pioneered the Ajax technique in the late 1990s, but due to the prohibitive development cost Smith mentioned, Ajax only started to take off in 2005.

"More recently, it seems that every new high-profile start-up company associated with the emerging Web 2.0 phenomenon -- Zimbra, 37 Signals, Flickr and SocialText -- has an Ajax aspect to its offering," according to Smith's presentation.

The research firm, noted for its predictions on technology and business, summed up by positing that there is an 80 percent chance that "By 2008, Ajax-style (sites) will be the dominant style for Rich Internet Application interfaces."

But part of the difference of Web 2.0 is that the character of the Internet is changing, according to the company's findings. Users are creating their own content on sites like MySpace, posting their pictures on Flickr, and tagging their favorite Web sites on del.icio.us, Smith said. Things are social and participatory.

Gartner analysts expected most businesses to rush out and try Ajax without effectively utilizing Web 2.0's community, social and user-driven aspects. In this case, "the result (of adopting Ajax and other new

technologies like Really Simple Syndication and Mashups) will have minimal business impact," Gartner research said.

His advice to businesses was to get on board -- "Management should lead cultural change by example ... by blogging to the staff. This sends the message that this is the way the company should think."

"Denial is pointless," Smith said to sum up. "Don't just roll your eyes -- this is going to be a really big thing when it all comes together."

"(Web 2.0) will change the way you work, bank, shop and get entertained radically. Again. Really," he said.

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