

Internet Explorer 9 puts spotlight on website features

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The Microsoft logo is displayed at the International Consumer Electronics Show in Las Vegas in January 2010. Microsoft on Wednesday released a lean, muscular new Internet Explorer crafted to spotlight slick websites and beat back competition from Firefox and Google in the Web browser arena.

Microsoft on Wednesday released a lean, muscular new Internet Explorer crafted to spotlight slick websites and beat back competition from Firefox and Google in the Web browser arena.

"The browser is the stage and the websites are the stars of the show," corporate vice president of Internet Explorer Dean Hachamovitch told AFP.

"Microsoft has over a billion Windows customers," Hachamovitch said of the software giant's ubiquitous computer operating system. "We want the browsing experience on Windows to be great."

The test, or beta, version of Internet Explorer 9 (IE9) made its public debut with theatrical flare at the San Francisco Design Center Concourse.

IE9 taps into more of the processing power in computers, especially the capabilities of graphics chips that excel at seamlessly rendering videos or videogame action.

"IE9 is using more of your personal computer," Hachamovitch said.

More than 70 partners including Amazon, Twitter, MySpace, Hulu, and Yahoo! are capitalizing on IE9 with faster, richer features at websites.

"We think that sites should be the most important part of the browser," Hachamovitch said. "This is actually the beauty of the Web. The real celebration is around the websites and what the partners have done."

While Microsoft doesn't charge separately for IE, the browser is included with Windows software and it is in the technology giant's interest to keep users happy and devoted to its products.

"As long as there is a browser built into Windows, Microsoft wants it to be as good as possible," said analyst Matt Rosoff of independent firm Directions On Microsoft. "It is also a platform play; as IE goes so goes the Windows platform."

IE has been losing ground in the browser market during the past five years, with its share of the market dropping from more than 85 percent in late 2005 to about 60 percent in August of this year, according to industry statistics.

The new browser lets people "pin" websites or applications to a tool bar at the base. Once a website is reached, the browser seems to step out of

the way and almost vanish to spotlight the content.

Alternative hip-hop band Gorillaz used IE9 to infuse its website with HTML5 audio and video as well as computer games.

Developers at software firm Cynergy showed off a computer game in which moths flitting about the screen had to be lassoed with circles quickly drawn using the cursor.

"In IE8 you would never have had the native hardware acceleration to move pixels around the screen fast enough to do this," said Tim Sneath, who runs Windows and Web evangelism for Microsoft.

Open-source browser Firefox had been gnawing away at IE's dominance, but that eased as a new rival arrived in the form of Chrome by Internet titan Google.

Chrome's share of the browser market has grown to slightly more than seven percent since the initial version of the software was released in September 2008, according to Net Applications.

"Google is one of Microsoft's archrivals and they can't like to see Google gaining share there," Rosoff said.

Firefox remained the second most popular browser with nearly 23 percent of the market, but its share has ebbed in recent months, according to Net Applications.

Microsoft seems to have hit the mark with IE9, according to analysts.

"It looks like they are taking a smart approach, which is to take you where you want to go and then get out of the way and fade into the background," Rosoff said.

The San Francisco event buzzed with energy in what analyst Rob Enderle of Enderle Group in Silicon Valley said was one of the best product launches ever by Microsoft.

"If this is an indicator of the kind of quality they are bringing out this year, this is a new Microsoft," Enderle said amid the hubbub.

A typical beta period for stable browser software would be three months, but Microsoft might wait until after the year-end holiday season to make a final version of IE9 available worldwide.

The IE9 beta came on the heels of the hit launch of the Windows 7 operating system and shortly before the releases of a Kinect motion-sensing controller accessory for Xbox 360 videogame consoles and a Windows 7 Mobile software platform for smartphones.

"I think (Microsoft chief executive) Steve Ballmer got the memo that he needed to step up, and he is," Enderle said.

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