

Browsed not Bruised (Internet Explorer versus the Rest)

To use the internet you use a piece of software called a browser, of which the best known is Microsoft's Internet Explorer. Most computers use Windows and Internet Explorer comes as standard with it, so consequently this is what most people use. But there is a choice: alternatives are available which many people find to be superior. Here's a quick introduction to what your choices are.

Firstly, given that Internet Explorer is already on the PC, why would you even consider using something else? There are a number of reasons but the main ones are:

- Alternative browsers can be faster (able to load and display web pages more quickly)
- Alternatives may have additional features that Internet Explorer does not, or has the same features but makes them easier to use
- Internet Explorer may not be available for your computer. For instance, the current version (IE9) only runs on Windows 7 and Windows Vista, meaning it is not an option if your computer is running Windows XP (and half the computers in the World do so)
- You may want a 'universal' browser. For instance, if you had both Windows PCs and Apple Macs you might want to use a browser that is available for both (Internet Explorer is not available for Mac)
- Some sites render (appear) better with other browsers
- A lot of malware/viruses are designed to specifically target Internet Explorer. You may find less problems if you use an alternative browser

There are three main competitors to Internet Explorer and they are: Mozilla Firefox; Google Chrome; Apple Safari. Other browsers are available (for instance, one called Opera is popular in Russia), but do not have anything like the global market share of the 'Big Four' so will not be discussed here. Here's the rundown.

Internet Explorer

As mentioned above, Internet Explorer is the most popular browser. However, this does not mean it is the best: the fact that it is pre-installed on most new computers gives it an enormous head start. Internet Explorer comes in three main flavours: IE7, IE8 and IE9. IE7 is an older version but still widely used; IE8 is the most popular variant; IE9 is the current version, but as mentioned previously is only available for Windows 7 and Windows Vista.

For many years, Internet Explorer was the 'gold standard' in browsers and many websites were designed with it in mind, such that they might not work properly with other browsers. However, those days have passed, and web designers nowadays are keen to ensure that their sites can be viewed correctly in as many browsers as possibly (including Smartphones and tablets as well as conventional computers). Ironically, it is sometimes Internet Explorer itself that has the problems; for instance, IE9 "broke" some sites. Latter versions of Internet Explorer even have special "compatibility view" modes to cope with older or otherwise awkward sites: a move which no other browser has found the need to do.

Internet Explorer's market share has been in decline in recent years. Once it was in the order of 90%; by Summer 2008 it was around 70%, by August 2011 it was about 40% (these figures can be argued but are considered reasonably indicative).

Internet Explorer remains a good... well, I was going to say choice but most people don't even realise they have a choice. It has the advantage of familiarity and near universality. However, it is an interesting observation that many people who work in IT tend not to use it.

Firefox

Firefox is the number 2 browser, with around 25% of the market. It has been around for 8 years and during that time it has matured into a very capable product; in general, it is faster than Internet Explorer, seems to handle more sites correctly and simply works very well. An attraction for some people is that it has attracted lots of independent 'add-ins' – small programs that extend or improve its functionality. For instance, one favourite is the Flash blocker, which makes web pages quicker by blocking the animated advertisements and videos that abound on the Internet. There are several thousand of these add-ins available to do all sorts of things.

Like all browsers, Firefox is free and that begs the question: what's in it for them? The answer is that the Firefox home page defaults to Google, meaning that searches go through them. In turn, Google pay a small commission to Mozilla (the non-profit organisation responsible for Firefox). Although this commission is tiny, there are tens of millions of copies of Firefox in use and this generates quite a large income to help finance the Mozilla Foundation.

Firefox is a popular choice for people who work in IT. However, it is not without its peculiarities. For instance it sometimes crashes and stays in memory, but unless you know what the Windows Task Manager is you can't work out what has happened and how to fix it. Plus, it has exhibited this behaviour for many years and across several versions. One great plus is that as a result of corruption or malware infection Internet Explorer can become damaged and not work properly on a computer, whereas Firefox will often continue to work without problems.

Google Chrome

Google Chrome is the 'up and coming' browser. At the time of writing it has only been around for three years and so is the baby of the browser world. Nevertheless, thanks to the huge reach of Google and aggressive marketing tactics it has managed to reach 20% market share and may well overhaul Firefox before too long.

Chrome has a reputation for speed, as in it loads quickly and displays pages quickly. Given that all browsers are constantly being updated and improved, it is often the case that what is the fastest browser one month may not be the fastest next month, plus performance can vary across sites. Nevertheless, Chrome's reputation for performance is well founded.

There are two downsides to Chrome. Firstly, it is updated very frequently by Google and you don't really have much control over the process. So, you might switch on the computer one day and find that Chrome has changed somewhat since the previous day, and in ways that you don't like and can't change. Secondly, some sites don't work properly with it as they specifically test for Internet Explorer or Firefox.

Apple Safari

Safari started life on the Apple Macintosh, where it remains the dominant browser. But, besides being available on the iPad, iPod and iPhone, it is also available for Microsoft Windows. This makes it a particularly good choice for people who work with both PCs and Macs. Market share is around 8% on conventional computer platforms (on the iPad it is effectively 100% of course!).

Safari has a reputation for innovation; frequently, features have appeared in it that have then been copied by other browsers. For instance, it introduced Private Browsing, a mode in which history and cookies are not kept so someone using the computer subsequently would not know what you had been doing. It also pioneered thumbnail views of websites – a sort of graphical favourites page. More recently, it introduced an article reader mode; selecting it strips out the adverts and graphics, enabling a text article to be read more easily.

Despite the innovations, Safari is sometimes a bit quirky on Windows PCs (but not on Macs). This makes it difficult to recommend as the main browser. Interestingly, Safari and Chrome have a common parent – a piece of software called WebKit, which also forms the basis of the browsers on Android phones and the Kindle eBook reader.

Conclusion

Internet Explorer is not the only browser – several alternatives are available and they all offer innovative or improved features compared to Internet Explorer. Many people will find that Firefox or Chrome suits them better for everyday Internet usage, although it is useful to retain Internet Explorer for the small number of sites that insist on it. Windows 7 or Vista users who have downloaded IE9 (whether intentionally or not) but find that they do not like it should consider switching to Firefox or Chrome. The current version of Safari cannot be recommended as the main browser for a Windows PC, but is it a great choice for anyone who uses both a Mac and a Windows PC.