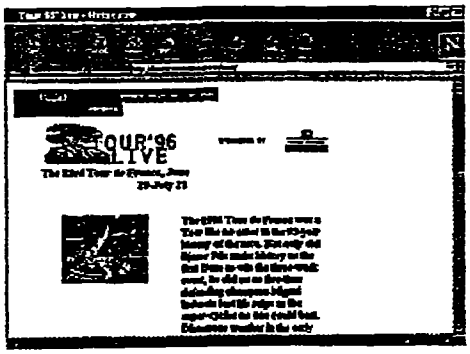
Netscape Communicator Pro 4.0: Still the Champ Of the Internet

Netscape's latest version of its popular browser proves that it can still hold its own

by David Haskin
Originally published in the October 1997 issue

ONLINE EXTRA! **Download: Netscape Communicator 4.03 (EXE 8.2MB)**



The computing industry's equivalent of professional wrestling is the battle between Microsoft and Netscape over dominance of the Internet. Although this rivalry may not be as entertaining as a professional wrestling match, it does provide users with substantial improvements on every update.

That's certainly true with Netscape Communicator Professional 4.0. This business-level upgrade to Netscape's Navigator features an integrated suite of tools that simplifies access to the Web and intranet resources, fosters communication and collaboration in workgroups, and makes creation of HTML pages easy for nontechnical users.

The centerpiece of Communicator Professional is the updated Netscape Navigator browser. The interface of the popular browser is more sophisticated and customizable than ever before. Four toolbars--the main text toolbar, the navigation toolbar, the location bar, and the personal bar--give you access to the Web and all the features of the suite. When Communicator Professional is up and running, you also have access to a floating taskbar that contains icons for Communicator Professional's components: Navigator, Mailbox, Discussions (Usenet), and Composer (the Web-page editor). The browser has also developed many small but satisfying usability improvements, including simple point-and-click security.

Increased ease of use is what most individual users will notice. Previously, for instance, setting Navigator preferences required wading through multiple dialog boxes. Now you set all options from a single dialog. Navigator's bookmark concept has also been simplified: Unlike previous versions, bookmark editing is available right from the location toolbar, and when organizing, it is clear which folder you are dropping bookmarks into. Finally, Navigator now supports multiple groups of settings, so laptop users can have one setting for work containing one group of preferences and bookmarks, and another setting for home.

GOVERNMENT EXHIBIT

All of the elements of the suite are tied together by their smooth look and easy accessibility to each other. In this sense, it is remarkably similar to Microsoft Internet Explorer; however, Communicator competes with Explorer in searching the Web. Clicking Navigator's Search toolbar button, for instance, displays a Web page from which you can launch searches--something that hasn't changed in this upgrade.By contrast, Internet Explorer 4.0 displays two onscreen frames. In one, you select a search engine, conduct the search, and view the list of found sites. Clicking on a found site displays it in the other frame. Microsoft wins that round.

Navigator shares its cornerstone status with the robust Netscape Messenger e-mail application. Messenger supports the emerging IMAP4 standard for transporting and managing mail, besides the more common POP3 and SMTP standards. To make reading and organizing easier, Messenger has a viewing pane for reading messages without opening a separate window. Also, Messenger competes with many larger e-mail clients by allowing you to create response "rules," as well as route incoming and outgoing messages to specific folders. You can, for instance, send messages automatically from your boss to the "Urgent Action" folder.

Messenger supports vCard technology, with which you can search Web-based "white pages" directly from Messenger's menus and address books, and then add these listings to your database of addresses. Also, you can include a vCard attachment automatically with your outgoing e-mail messages that contains your personal directory information, so recipients with e-mail programs that support vCard (such as Microsoft Outlook) can add your data to their address book easily.

To heighten task-sharing on this network or intranet--or simply to check your favorite newsgroups--Netscape Collabra is also provided with the suite. This newsgroup reader can also function as an online meeting site and is on par with the news service of Explorer's Internet Mail and News. In addition, it provides some features of Explorer's NetMeeting when it comes to online collaboration and security. In organizations that use Netscape's SuiteSpot Web server suite, you can use Netscape Collabra for private discussion groups, which fosters collaboration on projects. However, this requires your organization to commit to SuiteSpot.

For creating HTML pages, Communicator Professional's Netscape Composer is more useable than its predecessor in Navigator Gold 3.0. As in a word processor, you select tags such as headings from a drop-down list. You add items like links and images by first clicking on toolbar buttons, then completing dialog boxes. Similarly, you post your HTML pages to a Web server by filling out a dialog box. Additionally, Composer has added drag-and-drop capability and an integrated spell-checker. This simplicity means that you can create attractive Web pages without learning HTML.

Netscape Calendar, one of the features exclusive to Communicator Professional, is a personal and group scheduling program that covers the basics well. It provides daily, weekly, and monthly views of your calendar. Because it is browser-based, your entire workgroup can create to-do tasksand recurring appointments, as well as add alarms to alert them to impending events. When you select workgroup members for a meeting, the program checks their schedules and suggests a time in which everybody is free. It then notifies attendees via e-mail; they can accept or reject the meeting. If they accept, Netscape Calendar adds the event to their personal calendar automatically.

While Calendar would be an asset to the workplace, it isn't as integrated into the rest of the suite as you'd think--you might expect to select attendees from the Messenger address book, but you can't. Instead, an administrator must add workgroup members to a separate list, an inconvenience Netscape

claims it will rectify in further updates. Another minor imperfection is that although you can add a task to a colleague's to-do list, the colleague can't accept or reject the task as he or she could with a meeting.

Further setting Communicator Professional apart are Netscape AutoAdmin and Netscape IBM Host On-Demand. AutoAdmin is a general administration tool that allows network users to set up and manage 200 Communicator clients. IBM Host On-Demand is a Java-based application that gives intranet and Internet clients access to IBM host systems. Both of these programs contribute to a truly networked Netscape.

Communicator Professional also includes Netscape Conference Internet telephony utility. If you have a sound card, speakers, and a microphone, it enables you to talk over the Internet with others. It can take voicemail if you're not there to answer the phone, and it is simple to set up and use.

Most nonbusiness users will be satisified with the Standard version of Communicator 4, which is available as a download from Netscape's Web site. Communicator 4 excludes Calendar, AutoAdmin, and Netscape IBM Host On-Demand but includes all the other features, for a direct price of $59 (although you do not need to purchase it at the time of download).

The quantity and quality of Netscape Communicator Professional 4.0's additional applications should make its $79 direct price quite reasonable to business users, even though Microsoft gives away its competing Internet Explorer suite.Still, depending on your needs, free isn't necessarily better. Netscape has produced a robust collection of Internet tools that users will find simple to use and that foster workgroup and enterprise communication and collaboration.

Netscape Communicator's Navigator browser is now more customizable--with the ability, for instance, to add bookmarks directly to a toolbar.

Netscape Communicator Professional 4.0
Netscape Communications
501 E. Middlefield Rd.
Mountain View, CA 94043
415-937-2555
Fax: 415-528-4140
home.netscape.com
Support: Live phone support, 5 a.m. to 7 p.m. weekdays, 8 a.m. to 5 p.m. weekends (PT), 90 days free; Web
Requires: 8MB RAM; 18MB free disk space; Windows 3.1, Windows 95, or Windows NT 4.0
List Price: $79