

Browsing Around

If you use Windows, odds are you surf the web with Internet Explorer.

You're not alone. Nearly 80% of Internet users browse with Explorer – even though you can easily find alternatives with more and better features, that load pages faster, and offer tighter security.

So why don't more people switch? I suspect the same reason it took some time for new long distance companies to catch on: inertia, familiarity, and the threat of disruption.

In this column, I'll look at a couple of alternatives to Explorer: Firefox, Opera, and the brand-new Safari for Windows. All are easy to install and use, and all are free, download quickly, and set up easily. They also share the same basic features as Internet Explorer 7: tabbed browsing (the ability to open several web pages at a time in the same window), popup blockers, and a toolbar that allows you to search Google or other sites without having to navigate to them.

Firefox (www.mozilla.com) is the world's second-most popular browser, with about 15% of the market. Distributed by the non-profit Mozilla foundation, Firefox is a solid, stable program that will easily import all your Explorer settings. (Click on the File menu, then on Import). The handy saved session feature ensures that if you crash, Firefox reopens exactly as it was.

Because Firefox is open source, its code is available to all. As a result, thousands of independent developers have written add-ons that do everything from blocking ads, to creating grocery lists, to changing appearance. Download add-ons from the Firefox home page.

The good: Low memory usage, secure, customizable.

The bad: Sometimes gets hung up on PDF files.

In short: Go for it!

Opera (www.opera.com), the flagship program of Norway's Opera Software, is a robust and speedy browser with a couple of neat features. One of them is Speed Dial, which allows you to assign a number from 1-9 to your most frequently visited sites. Enter the number in the address bar and you go straight to the site. I also like the preview pane that appears when you roll your mouse over tabs that are open but not active. If you have many pages open at a time, this feature helps you keep straight which is which. On the safety side, Opera protects you from fraudsters with real-time anti-phishing tools. (You know those websites that purport to be from your bank or Paypal when they're really from fraudsters? That's phishing.)

The good: Interesting features.

The bad: Doesn't warn you by default when closing multiple tabs.

In short: An excellent alternative.

Safari (www.apple.com/safari) will be familiar to Mac users, but it only made its debut in the Windows world on June 11. The current version is a beta, which means it is a work-in-progress. I found Safari slow to load when first launched, but blazing after that. It handles PDF files speedily and automatically imports your Explorer favourites. That's right. You don't

have to click anything. Its look will be familiar to anyone who has used iTunes, and the bookmark organizer looks a lot like the iTunes window. The integrated RSS reader is nicely done too. The "Find" feature is brilliant and almost instantly highlights your search terms in a can't-miss kind of way. There are some weird drawbacks though, like no tool tips (the little windows that pop up when you scroll over a button to tell you what it does). Security is also a bit of an unknown factor.

The good: Fast, easy to use.

The bad: Several security flaws found on the day of its release. Tendency to crash.

In short: Wait until it is out of beta and into official release before considering it as a default browser.

If you do decide to make the leap to a new browser, don't delete Internet Explorer from your system. For one thing, keeping it ensures you can always go back, with your settings intact. Also, if you want to manually install Windows Updates, it's easiest to download them with Explorer.

Use the browser of your choice to read past Gone Surfin' columns at www.moscovitch.com/blog.