

## ONLINE STRATEGIES

# This column is not enhanced for Netscape 3.0

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If you spend much time browsing the Internet, you've probably noticed two kinds of advertisements.

The first kind are called "banner" ads. Think of them as display advertisements. Found on the most popular sites, such as Yahoo, InfoSeek and HotWired, a banner is an image of a uniform size (468 pixels wide, 60 pixels high) that points to a particular web site or product. Banners are the billboards of today's cyberspace.

The second kind of advertisement is more insidious, because it doesn't look like an advertisement. Instead, it's a little box surrounded by the words "This site is best viewed with the Netscape Navigator." The advertisement itself is a little button that says "Netscape Now!," Microsoft Internet Explorer, or even "WebSurfer 5.0 Now!"

Netscape's browsers have always offered a lot of exciting features for web page designers. And as web designers have become skilled in their craft, Netscape has added more and more features to its browser.

Netscape's first browser offers tables — the ability to present information like menus or price-lists in columns. Its second browser opened the world of animation through the Java and JavaScript programming languages. Netscape 3.0 gives users the ability to play audio and video clips, explore three-dimensional worlds, and engage in real-time chat with other users.

The problem with all of these new features is that those who don't have the latest and greatest Netscape browser won't be able to see web pages that use them. That's the real message behind the buttons. "To experience this web site in the best possible way, please download Netscape Now!" In other words, if some critical part of your web pages uses one of these advanced features, and the person who is looking at your pages doesn't have the appropriate browser, then the computer user won't see what you want them to.

I find these pervasive pseudo-advertisements for Netscape to be distasteful at the very least, and occasionally offensive. Many users on the Internet can't or won't use the latest version of the Netscape Navigator.

When they see these "Netscape Now!" messages on the Internet, they can't help but wonder why the people who set up the web sites felt compelled to use these "advanced" features.

Are all of those odd-ball browsers something to worry about when you design your organization's web pages? Absolutely. I examined the log files of my web site, <http://vineyard.net/>, to see which browsers were connecting. I found 160 different browsers over a four-week period. There were well-known browsers such as Netscape, Microsoft Internet Explorer and Mosaic. But there were also lesser-known browsers, like GNNworks, PRODIGY-WB, PipeMacWeb, OmniWeb, and TCPConnectII. Equally surprising was that most of the people using Netscape weren't using version 2.0 or 3.0 — they were using version 1.

Of course, it doesn't make sense to design a web site for the least common denominator. But it is nevertheless surprising just how good a web site can look without using Java, JavaScript, Shockwave, Active-X, and other features that are being pushed by the browser companies. Take a look

at the San Jose Mercury's web site, <http://www.sjmercury.com/> — an example of the layout possibilities simply using tables and images.

One of the reasons that companies like Netscape and Microsoft keep adding new features to their World Wide Web browsers is because they are trying to capture both mindshare and marketshare. Software companies can't do that by perfecting what's tried and true, which is the primary reason that the companies are spending their resources on developing new features.

Fortunately, web designers don't have to play along. By concentrating on high-quality content, understandable layouts, and a set of pages that are easy to navigate, you can put together a web site that continues to hold readers' interest. And you'll do it without spending tens of thousands of dollars developing slick gizmos that many of your readers can't use.▲

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