

THE BROWSER WAR THAT NO ONE CAME TO: THE EASY CONQUEST OF INTERNET EXPLORER

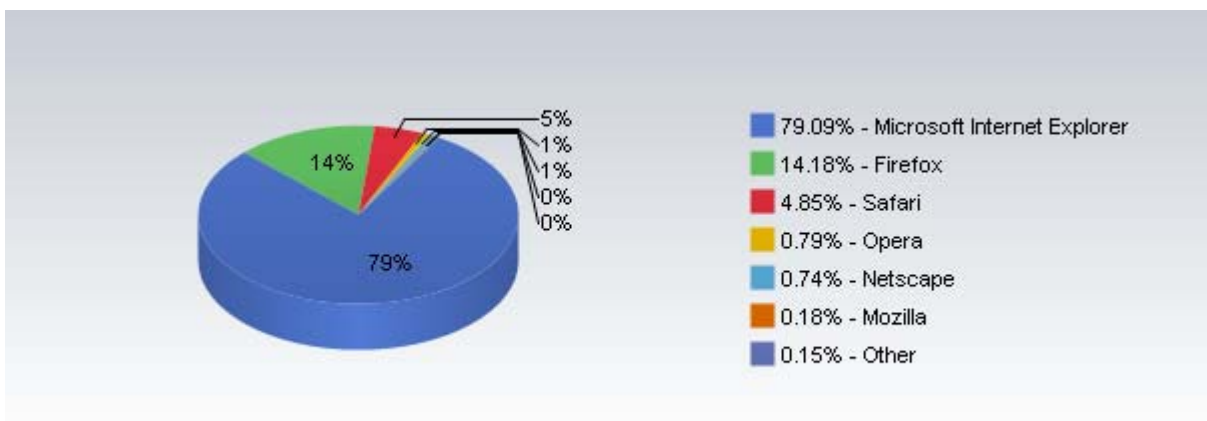
By Sharon D. Nelson, Esq. and John W. Simek
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A commonly asked question at recent legal tech seminars: should I upgrade to Internet Explorer 7? Should I be using Firefox? Is there a browser war, and if so, who's winning?

The battlefield was never bloody, the skirmishes were few, and those that once predicted the downfall of the Emperor Gates have been largely silenced by the overwhelming allegiance of the masses to Microsoft's Internet Explorer (IE). Most pundits declared that the browser war was on when Firefox debuted in 2004 and rapidly began to erode IE's market share. Now that IE7 has been released, will the encroachment continue?

The truth is that most people won't stray from IE. Lawyers are even less likely to stray from the Microsoft fold than most. Since their Microsoft operating system comes with IE, they are unlikely to summon the energy to try something else. Most lawyers are reluctant to download new software and even more reluctant to learn a new software application if the one they already have meets their needs. Unless you are lawyer/techie, you are unlikely to explore for the sake of exploration.

As of February 2007, various studies have shown that IE holds between 79-85% of the market share. Though the upstart Firefox made quick inroads against IE when first launched, the advancement has slowed, and the authors hereby go on record predicting that the advancement is likely to stall out completely with the advent of IE7, the newest version of Microsoft's browser.



Market shares of browsers as of February 2007, published by Net Applications
<http://marketshare.hitslink.com/report.aspx?qprid=0>

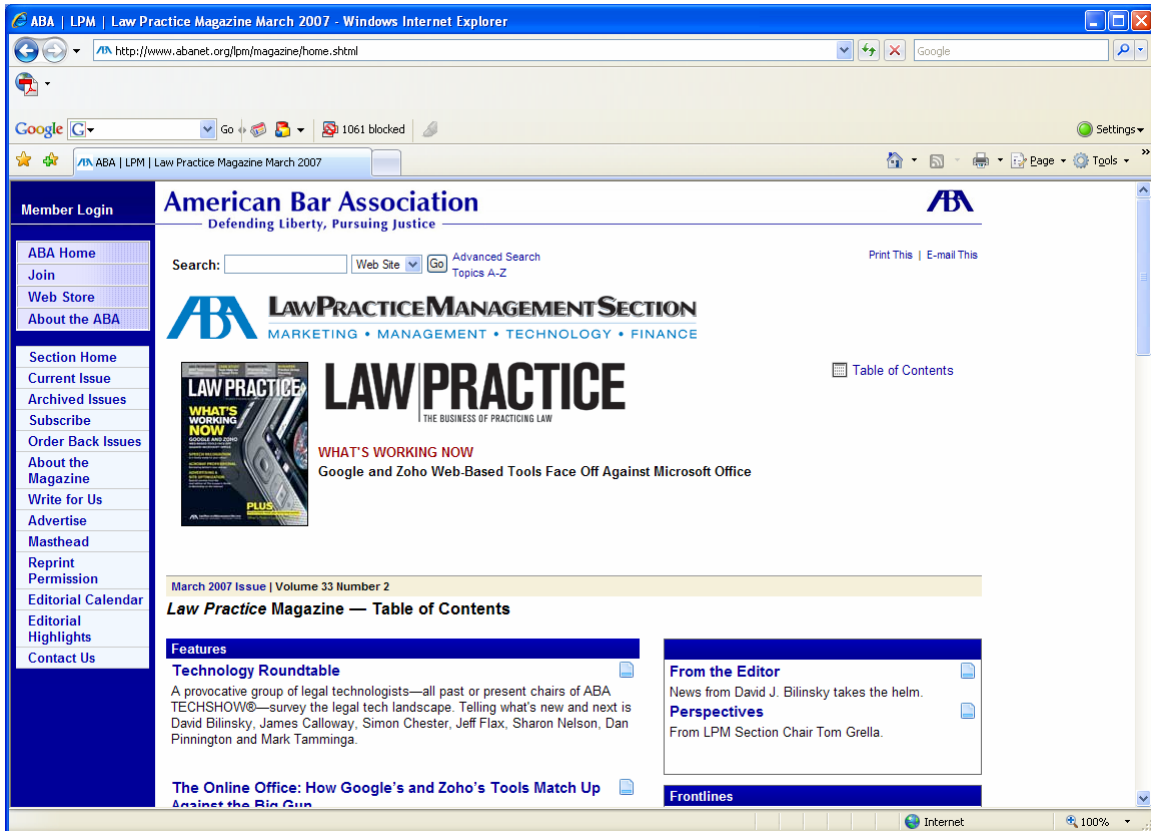
The early appeal of Firefox was undeniable. A sweet interface, great security, and the newfound wonder of “tabbed browsing” made Firefox the darling of the technogeeks and technology commentators. A respectable number of technically-inclined lawyers made the jump to Firefox, but the numbers do not seem to have grown much recently.

John is a diehard Firefox user, but Sharon tried it and abandoned it. Why? Simply because there are a goodly number of sites that do not perform well on Firefox – they were designed for IE. It was easier to go back to IE than to hop back and forth between the two browsers. In the beginning, Firefox was a relatively safe haven, left undisturbed by the virus writers of the world. But as its market share rose, and its anonymity faded, the writers of malware happily turned their malevolent attention to Firefox. While it is still probably true that Firefox is more secure than IE7, the new version of IE7 makes some great security strides.

Most notably, there is a new antiphishing filter, which will probably appeal to attorneys as well as everyone else. Though we’ve heard complaints about the filter slowing down the surfing, it certainly has not been apparent to us. Since we generally have jazzed up and very current technology, it may be that the filter tends to slow things on older systems.

There is one thing lawyers will probably not like about IE and that is the brand new interface. Lawyers tend to groan when forced to use new things and IE7 certainly presents a radically different design. If you upgrade, do it when you can spend a few quiet moments with your new browser and learn how to manipulate it. Don’t panic – nothing is monumentally hard here – but things are a tad different, old functions have been moved to new places and there is a small learning curve.

Here’s your preview of what the new interface looks like:



Most of the lawyers we know who moved to Firefox loved, above all else, the tabbed browsing feature, whereby you could have tabs (looking like file folder tabs) showing multiple open web pages making it very easy to move between active web sessions. Conversely, former versions of IE required you to go to the bottom of your screen and click on the IE box, find the web site you opened earlier and then click on it. IE7 cuts the legs off a primary Firefox feature by matching that terrific feature very adroitly. Tabbed browsing in IE is a snap. Take a look at the screenshot and you will see a small gray tab next to the currently open tab. Click on the gray tab and you can open a new site – where yet another gray tab will appear. Of course you can also use the <CTRL><T> keyboard shortcut (just like Firefox) to open a new tabbed browser window. We've opened as many as 20 tabbed sites at once without any problem. We especially like the feature whereby you can save a number of open sites in a "favorites" file – when you click on that file, all those tabbed sites open for you. This is a great feature for anyone who lectures at CLEs or does client presentations – and the tabs can be easily reordered, another significant bonus.

Confused about the tabbing feature? Suppose, during the day, you periodically check CNN, a weather site, a stock site, Westlaw, and a sports site. If you save these five sites in a favorites file, you can come in each morning and simply click on that file – all five sites will automatically open up with tabs at the top so you can very easily move between them. This is a great feature – and one that has existed in Firefox for some time. IE7 may stop the bleeding of those users who may have moved away for that feature alone.

Other new features include a Favorites Center with a quick “Add to Favorites” button and an RSS reader. Most lawyers will probably like the new Favorites Center and ignore the RSS reader as so few of them even know what RSS is. IE 7 also includes zoom technology and the new Clear-type page technology, which renders page fonts as sharp as those printed on paper. The zoom feature lets you use hot keys and preset sizes to present your web pages at the size you want. Printing is also greatly enhanced – now pages are automatically shrunk to fit on the printed page, which was a real problem for previous versions of IE and another reason lawyers jumped to Firefox. Beware, however – you may want to preview before printing because you can sometimes end up with microscopic text!

Overall, it is true that IE lacks some of the cutting edge features of Firefox 2 and Opera 9. IE does not include search engine suggestions, live feeds within bookmarks, inline spell-checking, session restore capacity, desktop widgets or read-the-page aloud features. Nonetheless, these features, cool as they are, are not the bread and butter features craved by the busy lawyer. Frankly, with the advent of tabbed browsing, it is increasingly unlikely that lawyers will find much reason to search for an alternative to IE7. IE7 is better than its predecessors when it comes to standards compliance, but it still falls short of Firefox. As an example, Firefox 1.5 is 93% compliant with the CSS (Cascade Style Sheet) 2.1 specification, IE6 is 52% compliant and IE7 “jumps” to 54%. Despite the compliance shortfall, Microsoft has successfully produced browsing software that will keep most users from looking for alternatives.

No doubt, as a significant cadre of learned commentators have remarked, there are better browsers than IE. Indeed, BETA was better technically than VHS, and we all know the ending to that story. So in the end, if there was a war at all, IE has been the victor. It has successfully defended itself against all challengers and left them only modest territories of their own. In the words of Bertrand Russell, “War **does not determine who is right - only who is left.**”

The authors are the President and Vice President of Sensei Enterprises, Inc., a legal technology and computer forensics firm based in Fairfax, VA. 703-359-0700 (phone)
www.senseient.com