Microsoft adds Shortcuts, Security to New Browser

(AP) - Microsoft Corp. released a new version of Internet Explorer Thursday, adding features meant to speed up common Web surfing tasks and bringing the browser's security measures in line with those of major competitors. The number of browsers has grown to a dizzying array, from Internet Explorer and Mozilla's Firefox, the two most popular, to Apple Inc.'s Safari, Google Inc.'s Chrome, the Norwegian entrant Opera and others. Each is using speed, security enhancements and new features to fight for a share of Web surfers' growing time online. Microsoft remains the dominant player, but Firefox's influence is growing. Dean Hachamovitch, the IE group's general manager, said in an interview Wednesday that the free browser is important to Microsoft because the company simply wants PC users to have a "great experience every day" when surfing the Web.

For Microsoft, as for Apple and Google, the browser is one more way to build relationships that could sway other decisions, like whether to buy a Macintosh or a Windows computer, or whether to use Google's Gmail instead of Microsoft's Hotmail. Google's entry into the market last year also shows the Web search leader believes owning the browser can help it better understand Web users' behavior and advertise to them more effectively — an area in which Microsoft is struggling to catch up. Internet Explorer 8, which marks Microsoft's first major browser update since August 2006, takes a stab at fixing many of the small annoyances people encounter every day. For one, IE 8 aims to reduce the need to copy something from one Web page and paste it into another — mapping a restaurant address, Googling a celebrity name, looking up an unknown word in Wikipedia or sharing a story by e-mail, Twitter or Facebook. A list of those little actions, which Microsoft is calling Accelerators, can be brought up by highlighting the text on a page and clicking on a small blue icon that appears. People can add new Accelerators to reflect their own search, e-mail and other habits. The new version of IE also adds a twist to the built-in toolbar search box. Firefox already lets people switch easily among search providers and sites like Amazon.com, eBay and Wikipedia using a drop-down menu. Microsoft takes this feature a step further. Type a word into the box and a preview of suggested searches or results appears in a drop-down list. Toggle between different search providers by clicking small icons in that window, and the list refreshes. So, search for "Camper shoes," for example.

Choosing Live Search calls up a list of suggested search terms. Switch to Amazon.com by simply clicking a small button to see a list of products for sale, complete with photos and prices. Microsoft also has expanded on a feature present on some browsers today — a toolbar button that opens a menu of the most recent news headlines. IE 8 users can add "Web slices" to keep track of eBay auctions,

stock quotes, blog posts, weather forecasts and other information that is frequently updated. Another useful feature — one that Firefox lacks but Google Inc.'s new Chrome browser employs — keeps related tabs together. If a user clicks on a link, thereby opening a new tab, Microsoft tucks that tab right next to the original. IE 8 also gives the tabs a common color. And in IE 8, when a Web page in one tab crashes, it doesn't bring down the whole browser. The Redmond, Wash.-based software maker added some new privacy features, including a mode for Web browsing that doesn't remember what sites were visited or store small data files called cookies. IE 8 lets people block ads from companies that track their Web surfing habits across a number of sites, a practice known as behavioral targeting.

Microsoft also made some much-needed security improvements in Internet Explorer 8, many of which are already employed by competing products. It beefed up protection against malware and known "phishing" scam sites, and built in technology to protect against another kind of threat, "cross-site scripting," in which hackers insert code into legitimate Web pages that compromise peoples' computers without them knowing it. IE 8 disables the bad scripts but in most cases allows others needed for a Web page to run as usual. Firefox already does something similar with an add-on program, but Microsoft argues that only the most sophisticated users know to seek it out and install it. IE 8 also helps people who create Web sites prevent another kind of attack called "click-jacking," in which Web surfers might think they're clicking on a legitimate button when in fact they're activating an invisible, malicious action. Microsoft has been notorious for building Web browsers that only partially follow Web standards, or agreed-upon ways of reading Web designers' code and displaying the page as described. With IE 8, Microsoft has promised to adhere to standards. But since many Web pages, including Microsoft's own corporate sites, were built to work best with IE, the new version may "break" some pages. The fix? A button that reverts to the old, nonstandard way of operating.

On the Net: http://www.microsoft.com/ie8 [1]

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