



## Internet browsers

Microsoft recently offered consumers a 'browser choice' update to comply with a legal settlement with the European Commission allowing you to easily change browsers. *Consumer Choice* browses your options.

The last time *Consumer Choice* reported on browsers in 2006, Microsoft Internet Explorer had eclipsed Netscape in terms of market share, with Firefox and Opera nipping at its heels. And because Internet Explorer (IE) is bundled with every Windows based PC, this gave Microsoft a huge edge in attracting web surfers.

As a result of this, the European Commission required Microsoft to inform those customers currently using IE as their default browser that there are other web browser choices available. This resulted in a browser choice update being shown to consumers in Europe who are using Windows XP, Windows Vista or Windows 7, and who have IE as their default browser.

This browser choice screen presents a list of browsers, making it easy for consumers to install any one of them. On the browser choice screen, consumers are given a choice of twelve browsers. The first five are Internet Explorer 8, Mozilla Firefox, Apple Safari, Google

Chrome and Opera. Although the order in which they appear is random, they were granted the top spots because they have the largest market share. Scrolling along the window reveals more obscure browsers Avant, Greenbrowser, Maxthon, Flock, K-Meleon, Sleipnir and FlashPeak SlimBrowser.

### What is a browser?

When you need to find and display pages on the Internet, you use a browser, which is a software application on your computer. The first browsers were very basic, text-only applications, but soon they could handle graphics and images. Now, modern browsers have lots of features, including built-in online safety features, tabs and private browsing. They are also highly customisable.

### Market share

*Consumer Choice* looked at which browsers our members have been using to view our new-look website. Since it

was launched in late February this year 69% of visitors viewed the site using Internet Explorer (IE). A long jump below IE, the next largest number of views came from Firefox with 18%. With another large gap in market share, Chrome and Safari were each used to view our website 6% of the time. Opera was used just 0.5% of the time.

According to the latest figures from StatCounter, Internet Explorer had dropped from 55.23% of usage to 53.36% in Ireland between February and April 2010. While Firefox remained largely static, Chrome saw the largest rise in market share from 8.98% to 10.96% in the same period.

### Internet Explorer 8

Internet Explorer (IE) is the browser most consumers will be familiar with, as it comes bundled with Microsoft Windows. If you choose to keep this browser, it's worth checking that you have the newest version, as this offers the

#### AT A GLANCE

Antitrust.

Browser ballot.

Alternatives to IE.

best security for your computer.

The latest incarnation, IE8, has some new features compared to the previous version but looks quite similar. First of all, new security features have made it more secure. InPrivate lets you browse without any browser history, cookies and other personal information being saved by the browser. Tabbed browsing has also been improved, whereby tabs are automatically colour coded and grouped together so you can see which tabs relate to each other.

## Mozilla Firefox

Firefox is one of the original free browsers and is second only to Microsoft in terms of market share. Firefox 3.6 is full-featured, fast and secure. As open source software, anyone can develop add-ons for the browser, leading to a huge range of 6,000 useful add-ons, plug-ins and themes to allow consumers to customise their browser. The latest version (3.6) is also about 20% faster than version 3.5.

Firefox features the Awesome Bar, which essentially allows you to type the name of a website into the address bar so that a list of possible sites from your browsing history and bookmarks appears. Other features include tabs, private browsing and anti-phishing and anti-malware tools.

## Apple Safari

Apple Safari is available for both the Mac (Apple) and the PC (Windows). The current version is Safari 4, which lacks some of the customisation features of other browsers. It looks quite like Google Chrome, but new tabs appear at the bottom of the window rather than the top. The status bar and menu bar are hidden by default, which may be confusing for some consumers. However by clicking on the 'gears' icon you can access toolbar changes and customisation settings. Safari 4 features 'cover flow', which allows you to visually search recent site history and bookmarked sites by presenting a full page preview of websites.

## Google Chrome

All the browser producers wax lyrical about the speed of their browser, and Google is no different. It's difficult to say which is the fastest as it depends very much on your hardware. However Chrome 4 is very fast and more stable than previous versions. The user interface

for Chrome is very simple and clean.

It also has some nice features, including 'incognito' mode, whereby pages that you view won't be saved in your browser history. You can search directly from the address bar, called the 'Omnibox'. You can also choose to set your homepage so that you see a list of your most visited sites when you open a new tab or window, which can be a useful feature if you regularly visit the same sites.

## Opera

Along with every other browser maker, Opera claims its own as the 'fastest browser on earth'. And it certainly is fast. Similar to Chrome, Opera features 'Speed dial' which shows your most visited pages and it also allows you to search directly from the address bar. It has an inline spell checker and allows you to use mouse gestures to perform common browsing actions with small, quick mouse movements, such as previous page and next page. Opera Turbo can be used to boost your browsing speed if you have a slow connection.

Opera also produces Opera Mini and Opera Mobile, designed to be used on mobile phones with speed and efficiency controls to help webpages load faster.

## Avant

Another 'fastest web browser on earth', the Avant browser is built on the same rendering engine as Internet Explorer. It has some nice built-in features and allows you to customise the interface. There were no major issues with ease of use, but it lacked a tutorial or user guide and support is only available through email or user forums.

## Greenbrowser

Greenbrowser works just fine and is easy to use, but there was no compelling reason we found to choose this over any other browser. The homepage offers links to entertainment, technology and news sites. It has the ability to auto-fill forms and tabbed browsing, but these are standard across most browsers now.

## Maxthon

Maxthon is a versatile browser that is easily customisable, and has some nice features to increase your surfing speed. One nice extra feature is the ability to drag a web address from an email, word documents or elsewhere, drop it in the address bar and have the browser take

you there. It does lack some of the features you would expect from higher ranked browsers, such as thumbnail previews, parental controls and anti-phishing technology.

## Flock

Flock is an ideal browser if you're interested in social media and social networking sites. It's built over the Mozilla-powered browser and is intended to keep you up to date with your contacts from networks such as Facebook, MySpace, Flickr and Twitter. It does this by displaying any updates in a panel on the left hand side of the screen.

## K-Meleon

K-Meleon is fast and customisable. It's based on the engine used by Mozilla Firefox, is open source and is released under the same GNU General Public License. It's designed for Windows computers and is easy to use. As with many other less known browsers there is no compelling reason to switch to it.

## Sleipnir

Sleipnir is a fully customisable browser, but is designed for more advanced users. Consumers can change the design, skins and visual appearance. It also allows you to add custom functionality but this impacts on the ease of use and is better left for more advanced users.

## FlashPeak SlimBrowser

Another highly customisable browser, you can arrange the toolbars and add or remove buttons to get it to look exactly how you want it. Again, it's fast and secure and has plenty of features to keep you interested. Each URL that you type introduces a new tab, but the tabs don't clutter your window. Scroll buttons allow you to move back and forth between them quickly and easily.

## Our choice

In this review, we decided to replicate the typical consumer experience - we tried each of the twelve browsers for a day in order to bring you our user impressions. This was not a lab test, which would have involved a much more detailed and rigorous testing process. It's hard to say which is best, based on short-term usage.

This researcher can report, however, that she has made the switch to Google Chrome, which impressed her most with its simple, clean interface, speed, stability and range of user features.

## Useful websites

**Apple Safari**  
[www.apple.ie/safari](http://www.apple.ie/safari)

**Avant Browser**  
[www.avantbrowser.com](http://www.avantbrowser.com)

**Browser Ballot**  
[www.browserchoice.eu](http://www.browserchoice.eu)

**FlashPeak SlimBrowser**  
[www.flashpeak.com/sbrowser](http://www.flashpeak.com/sbrowser)

**Flock**  
[www.flock.com](http://www.flock.com)

**Google Chrome**  
[www.google.com/chrome](http://www.google.com/chrome)

**Greenbrowser**  
[www.morequick.com/IndexEn.htm](http://www.morequick.com/IndexEn.htm)

**K-Meleon**  
[kmeleon.sourceforge.net](http://kmeleon.sourceforge.net)

**Maxthon browser**  
[www.maxthon.com](http://www.maxthon.com)

**Mozilla Firefox**  
[www.mozilla.com/firefox](http://www.mozilla.com/firefox)

**Opera Browser**  
[www.opera.com](http://www.opera.com)

**Sleipnir**  
[www.fenrir-inc.com/global/sleipnir](http://www.fenrir-inc.com/global/sleipnir)

**Windows Internet Explorer 8**  
[www.microsoft.com/windows/Internet-explorer](http://www.microsoft.com/windows/Internet-explorer)

**Report by Jenny Harrow** 