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Fewer pop-ups means more work

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ComputerWorld Canada (16 Apr 2004)

We all hate them, those annoying pop-over and pop-under (collectively called "pop-up") ads that sprout up while we're surfing the Web.

With all that build-up hatred, developers have been busy building software that automatically blocks pop-ups. That means no more pop-up ads. The use of pop-blocker software has an ever-growing installation base, currently estimated in the five to 15 per cent range today, depending on which study you read. Many have downloaded the Google Toolbar (a free utility that comes with a pop-blocking feature) or use Netscape 7.1 or Firebird 0.7, which have it built into their browsers.

And then there are countless more free services that offer pop-up blocking as part of their IE add-ins. It's gotten so popular that even Microsoft is planning to include pop-up blocking technology in their next release of IE due out some time in the next year. So what the big deal? Many sites continue to use this technique to automatically launch new browser windows when a visitor first comes to the site, or even when they click on a link.

That means you should start thinking about all those Web pages you've coded that display useful information in a secondary window. Will they work in someone's browser who has enabled their pop-up blocker? Right now it depends on which utility their using. Some just block javascript-based auto pop-ups (like the Google Toolbar), while others not only block javascripts but also the very popular "target=blank" variable for the "href" tag.

My personal favorite pop-up blocker is the ever-so-lovely Google Toolbar, and for a variety of reasons, including watching the built-in counter that shows just how many pop-ups it's blocked. You'd be surprised how quickly it reaches 100-plus. The problem with these tools is they also block the legitimate use of pop-ups. Since I've been using the blockers there have been several occasions when I've become frustrated because I thought my browser crashed, or that the site was broken because when I was clicking on a link and nothing happened. Fortunately, I soon noticed that my blocked pop-ups counter was going up. So I quickly allowed the particular site to allow pop-ups and away I went.

Keep in mind, however, that I'm considered a power user when it comes to browsers. What about the site visitor whose kid installed the Google Toolbar? Will he or she know enough to disable the function for your site? My guess is no. And this problem is going to get worse before it gets better with the next release of IE.

So start examining your Web site programming techniques and come up with other options that don't involve pop-ups. By planning now, you'll be ready when the penetration rate for blockers jumps to at least 60 per cent with the release of the next version of IE.

Now you can blame the pop-ups not only for disturbing you during your Web surfing time, but for a lot of extra hours you're going to need to re-program your sites.

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