

Technology laggards play pivotal role in keeping the beat of innovation

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Jerry Gropp, an architect, in his home in Mercer Island, Washington. He uses AOL's dial-up service to send maps and photos. (Kevin P. Casey for The New York Times)

Every time he has fired up his Netscape Web browser since mid-February, John Uribe has been greeted with a message urging him to switch to one of Netscape's two successors, Firefox or Flock.

The missives came from AOL, Netscape's parent company, and warned him that Netscape, which introduced millions of people to the Internet, was about to become a digital orphan. On March 1, he was told, AOL would stop providing support for Netscape, leaving a band of users loyal to the Web browser to fend for themselves if they ran into technical problems.

Uribe, a 56-year-old real estate agent in Waldorf, Maryland, ignored every message.

"It's kind of irrational," Uribe said as that deadline approached. "It worked for me, so I stuck with it. Until there is really some reason to totally abandon it, I won't."

The technology industry thrives on its ability to sell new products to consumers at an ever-increasing pace, and it has turned many upgrades into painless, one-click operations. But million of users of nearly every type of Internet service and technology, from Netscape and AOL dial-up to old e-mail systems, still prefer to ignore the pitches and sit still - or at least move ahead at their own pace.

Uribe, a professed late adopter, is one of them. He still has dial-up Internet access at home and he does not lust after the latest tech gadgets. He is content with his aging Dell computer, which he said has an absurdly small amount of memory.

He is hardly alone. Netscape users accounted for 0.14 percent of the Internet population in February, according to OneStat.com, which offers Web monitoring services. That is a tiny fraction of the market, but it still represents more than a million users, many of whom use aging versions of Netscape.

Meanwhile, more than nine million people still pay \$10 to \$25 a month for AOL's dial-up service when faster broadband service is available in most parts of the country, often at comparable prices. Dial-up is a rapidly declining business, but it is not an insignificant one. After all, it accounted for most of AOL's \$5.2 billion in revenue last year.

Yahoo updated its popular Web e-mail service last year, but tens of millions of its customers stuck with the company's "classic" e-mail.

And on the Well, a pioneering online community founded in 1985, hundreds of people communicate using an archaic text-only system, even though a Web-based graphical interface has been available for years.

"Every other online conversational space has a toolbar where you can plug in your favorite winking face," said David Gans, a musician and radio host, who has been a member of the Well for 22 years. Gans said he used the Well's text interface, in part, because it helped to keep the quality of conversations high.

"Just because you can have a nuclear-powered thing that can dry your clothes in five minutes doesn't mean there isn't value to hanging your clothes in the backyard and talking to your neighbor while doing it," Gans said.

New, of course, is not always better, and people hang on to existing technologies for a variety of reasons, including loyalty, satisfaction with what they have, fear of time-consuming upgrades and even inertia.

In the age of Facebook, blogs and micro-blogging services like Twitter, these are forces that technology companies need to understand and address as they bet their fortunes on their ability to market a nearly continuous stream of new products and upgrades.

Experts say that late adopters, or technology laggards, are not necessarily Luddites and can play a pivotal role in keeping the beat of innovation.

"Laggards have a bad rap, but they are crucial in pacing the nature of change," said Paul Saffo, a technology forecaster in Silicon Valley. "Innovation requires the push of early adopters and the pull of laypeople asking whether something really works. If this was a world in which only early adopters got to choose, we'd all be using CB radios and quadraphonic stereo."

Saffo said that aspects of the laggard and early adopter coexist in most people. They may buy the latest digital camera, but end up using only a fraction of its features, or they may proudly carry an iPhone but still pay their bills by check, rather than online.

At 81, Jerry Gropp, an architect in the Seattle area, is a bit of both. He has a high-speed Internet connection through Comcast and Web e-mail accounts with Yahoo and Hotmail. But he still pays AOL for its dial-up service, largely because the desktop e-mail software packaged with it makes it easier to include maps, photographs and notes in the body of messages, rather than as attachments.

"I've been on this for about 20 years," he said about AOL's service. "In some ways, the old may be the best, combined with the new."

Technology laggards are neither new nor unique to the Internet.

Consider, for instance, that an estimated 13 million U.S. households are ill-prepared for the switch in February 2009 to all-digital TV broadcasts. And individuals and businesses alike have long complained about the upgrade "treadmills" that benefit software sellers, but not necessarily buyers.

But the Web has changed things. In the past, many late adopters upgraded their software only when they bought new hardware or when they were forced to because they could no longer read the files they received from others. Now, Internet companies can, and do, deliver upgrades with a flip of a virtual switch - not always to the delight of their customers.

In mid-2006, AOL turned its Netscape.com site, a once-popular portal that had faded into near obscurity, into a "social news" site where users' votes would determine which items received top billing.

The experience proved disastrous, as many of the mostly late adopters who still relied on Netscape.com, the default home page for the browser, disliked the change. AOL reversed course a little more than a year later, but not before losing about half of Netscape.com's users in the United States.

AOL declined to comment on the experience, but a spokeswoman pointed to a message in a company blog explaining the September 2007 course reversal: "We received some feedback that people really do associate the Netscape brand with providing mainstream news that is editorially controlled."

Dan Clifford, managing partner and founder of AnswerLab, a research company that conducts usability tests for clients like Yahoo, Intuit and eBay, offers a rule of thumb for Internet companies that want to succeed with upgrades. "People need to think about order of magnitude improvements in terms of benefits, efficiencies or costs," Clifford said.

Yahoo thought it was delivering such a vast technological improvement when it began unveiling a new e-mail system in September 2006. Eighteen months later, tens of millions of the company's estimated 250 million e-mail users are still using the old service. Yahoo is now supporting both, saying it is happy to give customers a choice.

There are times when people hold on to older technologies simply out of nostalgia.

"I am not rational about these things," said Stephen Lee, a doctor in Hanover, New Hampshire, who still has dial-up access and e-mail from CompuServe, an online service founded in 1969 that AOL bought in 1998. "I have a soft spot for it," he said, adding that he did not like to see early Internet icons fade into oblivion.

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