

Sony to distribute Google browser

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Google has forged a distribution alliance with Sony's PC division and is in talks with other computer makers as it looks to promote its well-regarded but little-used Chrome browser.

The renewed efforts to expand the reach of Chrome come a year after Google opened a new front in the browser wars with the surprise launch of the software. They highlight the difficulties the company has faced in using Chrome as a strategic weapon to counter Microsoft.

The deal with Sony, which involves shipping Chrome on new Vaio PCs, is the first the internet company has struck with a computer maker. Similar distribution alliances have become a key part of the internet search wars as Microsoft and Google vie to be the default search service on new PCs.

Google confirmed that Sony PCs carrying Chrome had started to go on sale and said it was in talks for similar deals with other computer makers. It said the arrangement was "experimental" and part of wider efforts to boost distribution, including a deal to make Chrome available to internet users who download the RealPlayer software and the company's first use of television advertising.

Brian Rakowski, product management director for Chrome, claimed a successful launch for the browser, which has 30m active users.

However, that is equivalent to little more than 2 per cent of all internet users, compared with 68 per cent for Microsoft's Internet Explorer, according to Net Applications.

The lacklustre launch contrasts with that of the Firefox browser in 2004, which was used by 8 per cent of all internet users after its first year. Although it lacks Google's massive reach and deep engineering resources, Firefox is used on almost a quarter of all internet-connected PCs.

Google executives express frustration at what they consider a lack of interest among internet users about browsers. "Awareness is shockingly low" given how much people rely on browsers, said Mr Rakowski. "It's absolutely a problem that people don't know what a browser is, or how to evaluate one."

In spite of the low audience for Chrome so far, Google said it should be judged by its impact in making rivals improve their own technology more quickly, and in leading to greater standardisation among rival products.

That points to the company's wider objectives with Chrome, to prevent Microsoft's dominance from holding back development or enabling the software giant to restrict access to Google's services.

"It's not so important everyone uses Google Chrome, it's more important browser technology evolves as fast as it can," said Mr Rakowski. Chrome set new records in terms of its speed, prompting a race among rivals to boost the performance of their own software.

Financial Times, London, Aug. 31st 2009, Technology, online.