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Firefox for Dummies (Part Two)

By Dana Greenlee, Technology Columnist
Last Friday, we talked with Blake Ross, the 20-year old who started writing code for Netscape at age 14 and has since co-founded the Firefox project and SpreadFirefox.com. He is also author of the new book Firefox for Dummies.

Ross had more to say about his book and the Firefox competition with Microsoft's Internet Explorer browser.

DANA **GREENLEE**: What were you trying to accomplish when you wrote your book FireFox for Dummies?

BLAKE ROSS: My intent for the book was not to just give the how of the product but to give the

BLAKE ROSS

why of the product. I can't tell you how many times people asked me, "Why would somebody design a piece of software to work like this?" They run into some kind of crash in Microsoft Word or some kind of feature that doesn't work quite right. Because I was part of the team that designed the Firefox interface, the book goes into a lot of depth about why we made the decisions that we made early on.

GREENLEE: What kind of things are in the book that make it different?

ROSS: The book starts with the history of Firefox which is kind of twisted. I also go into why we named it Firefox, why the tabbed navigation feature, which everyone loves, is so hidden in the product, and why you have to pull it out -- just a bunch of little anecdotes about the Firefox browser development that a lot of people don't know.

GREENLEE: How did you come up with the name Firefox? It's a cool, fun, friendly name.

ROSS: It was originally called Mozilla. That was named after the source code directory the product lived in. But we weren't among the most ingenious of marketers back then. We rechristened the product Phoenix. The idea there was this product is being reborn from the ashes of Netscape. It was a not-so-subtle jab at our parent company. Turns out Phoenix was taken. We didn't have any money and we didn't have any intent to "productize" this little hobby we were working on. We came up with the name Firebird because it denotes the same imagery of the Phoenix. We quickly found out there was a trade name violation with that one as well. We gave up on the whole bird imagery and just wanted Fire. So we spent a couple of months going back and forth with names like Fire Blast, Firebomb, FireBox, Fire Towel… and finally someone came up with Firefox.

GREENLEE: Why do you think your browser has been adopted so widely and so fast?

ROSS: It was the grassroots aspect that was most responsible for the growth of this product.

People think it just came together, which is what grassroots is, but the truth is we worked very hard to help the grassroots effort form. We did that through an effort called "Spread Firefox" (http://www.spreadfirefox.com). We realize there was this huge community of people who weren't developers, didn't want to test the products, but were passionate about Firefox. We wanted to find a way to leverage the talents of all these people to help the product out in some way. "Spread Firefox" brought them all together and gave them the tools: go to your Toastmaster club, go to your university, go to your parents friends and businesses and just spread the word as far and wide as you can. "Spread Firefox" is actually responsible for 20 million downloads in the first six months of Firefox. That was a huge, huge driver.

GREENLEE: How many downloads has Firefox had so far?

ROSS: We have a ticking counter on SpreadFirefox.com. I think it is sitting at around 170 million right now. We know our market percentage is somewhere between 12 and 15 percent globally at this point.

GREENLEE: Microsoft is coming out with IE7. Will it put a dent into your adoption curve?

ROSS: I think Internet Explorer 7 is a very competitive browser. I tried their betas and they've certainly made strides since IE6. It's really a matter of commitment. If you look at the browser landscape of the last six years, essentially Microsoft disappeared for four of them. In 2001, they completely disbanded the Internet Explorer team. Never mind there were pop-up adware and spyware and viruses and all that kind of junk that was infecting the Web at that point. Microsoft won the browser war and then, effectively, exited the market. It was a free product and there really is no justification for a public company to spend resources on it. Yes, they are back in the game right now, and you can bet it's because we're pushing them back -- but I really question their commitment to this space and whether or not they're really going to be here in another three years pushing the Web forward. It's a question of if you want to use a product from a company that, in the past, kind of left you hanging.

GREENLEE: With the fast growth of the Firefox browser, Microsoft is paying more attention now. It's just that when there was no other alternative out there, they forgot about it.

ROSS: It's also a different world. They fought this battle once before with Netscape. A few different things factor in this time around. The first issue is it's no longer difficult to download a 5 MB piece of software, which is what Firefox is. In the Netscape days, it was a much bigger piece of software and it was convenient that Internet Explorer came preinstalled on computers. It was still the box software days. The other issue is Microsoft is trying to copy not just Firefox features but also trying to copy Firefox's sense of openness. They decided that Firefox is popular because people appreciate its open source, it's developed by a community of volunteers, our communications are very open, you can see our road map and submit your own ideas. In response, Microsoft, for the first time ever, has set up an Internet Explorer team blog, they've got an open bug tracking database now, they've got monthly chats with the team. I would think that's great, except I feel like it's all just a bunch of people in a room with a whiteboard saying, "How do we respond to this whole idea of open source?" That feels kinda sleazy to me. I think people can tell the difference between a genuine community and doing something for marketing reasons.

You can read Blake's blog at http://www.blakeross.com .