

REDEFINING BROWSER SUPPORT

Our standing definition of “browser support” has been providing a consistent appearance, thus an identical experience, in all modern browsers. This stance has worked in most cases. However, some clients have taken the concept of consistency to extremes, expecting each pixel to be in the exact same place on all browsers. This attitude generates additional costs, both in our morale and our profitability. By redefining our concept of support, we can help avoid these edge cases while maintaining quality of experience.

REDEFINING SUPPORT

“Supporting” a browser used to be a yes-or-no decision, blocking unsupported browsers from viewing the site. With current technologies, we no longer need to block older browsers, the black-and-white televisions of the Internet, from receiving content to assure that the content is delivered in a functional and relatively attractive format. However, we obviously cannot expect a black-and-white television to deliver the same level of experience as a modern flat-panel model.

These discrepancies among browsers are the foundation of graded browser support. The heart of graded browser support is delivering a comparable experience for the browser used to view the site – giving modern flat-panels a vibrant, colorful image while letting old black-and-white televisions display the image on their smaller screens without color.

A-GRADE SUPPORT

The top grade of support, A-grade, is provided for modern browsers, the flat-panels of the Internet. A-grade browsers are modern, capable, and common. The browsers at this level have powerful capabilities allowing for advanced functionality and appearance. Approximately 96% of Internet users receive an A-grade experience.

The list of A-grade browsers will be updated quarterly or as appropriate. Decisions on a browser's support status will be based on development community trends, usage statistics, and internal assessment.

C-GRADE SUPPORT

C-grade support is provided for older browsers incapable of providing modern technologies. These browsers are antiquated, incapable, and rare. Approximately 3% of Internet users receive a C-grade experience.

X-GRADE SUPPORT

Rare and unknown browsers are covered under X-grade support. These browsers are assumed to be modern and capable. However, since the browsers' capabilities are unknown, sites are not tested in them. X-grade browsers are those not on the A-grade and C-grade lists. Once an X-grade browser is tested, it is moved to one of the other grades according to its capability and frequency. X-grade browsers account for 1% of Internet users' experiences.

WHAT DOES THIS MEAN FOR CLIENTS?

This philosophy change will largely be transparent to clients. Quality assurance will ensure a comparable experience across all A-grade browsers and a sample of C-grade browsers. This will account for approximately 98% of an average site audience.

Client expectations of identical experiences across browsers, even across modern A-grade browsers, are impractical, unrealistic, and harmful to the project. Differences among web browsers would prevent this expectation from being fulfilled, frustrating the client and the developers.

WHAT DOES THIS MEAN FOR SALES?

The phrases “identical experience”, “look alike”, “look the same”, etc. should not be used. Sales should be careful to keep the clients from developing the expectation of identical experiences.

Sales should also remain aware of the current list of A-grade browsers. If the client's conditions of satisfaction include browsers not on this list, additional costs will be incurred during development and quality assurance.

WHAT DOES THIS MEAN FOR DEVELOPERS?

Developers should test the appearance and functionality of the site in all A-grade browsers and address all issues. They should also test a cross-section (1 to 3) of C-grade browsers and address all issues. X-grade browsers are not tested and any issues discovered are not addressed.

This approach is somewhat similar to the current approach. The grades of browsers will provide some additional certainty by addressing only known browsers, ignoring the fringe X-grade browsers.

Eliminating the expectation of identical experiences will allow developers to concentrate more on functionality and usability. Furthermore, the periodic review of browser support grades will identify irrelevant browsers more rapidly.

WHAT DOES THIS MEAN FOR QUALITY ASSURANCE?

Quality assurance should ensure functionality and appearance in all A-grade browsers and pass all issues to developers. They should also check a cross-section (1 to 3) of C-grade browsers and pass all issues to developers. X-grade browsers are not checked. If an X-grade browser is moved to the A-grade list, quality assurance should take the lead on developing a test plan for the browser.

Like developers, quality assurance will be able to concentrate more on functionality and usability by eliminating the expectation of identical experiences. The periodic review of browsers will allow quality assurance to focus more on relevant work as well.

WHAT ARE THE CURRENT A-GRADE BROWSERS?

As of January 1, 2006, the A-grade browsers are as follows:

	Windows	Mac
IE 7.0	A-grade	
IE 6.0	A-grade	
Firefox 2.0.*	A-grade	A-grade
Firefox 1.5.*	A-grade	A-grade
Opera 9.*	A-grade	A-grade
Safari 2.0*		A-grade

The most notable inclusion in this list is the Opera web browser. Opera is a standards-compliant browser that includes many popular features. Its popularity is growing, making its way onto Windows and Mac computers, game systems, and mobile devices.

The most notable exclusion from this list is any version of Netscape. Many versions of Netscape were plagued with various bugs and its popularity has been steadily declining. Its share of the browser market is currently less than one percent.

RESOURCES

Yahoo! UI Library: Graded Browser Support

<http://www.unipeak.net/gethtml.php?url=aHR0cDovL2RldmVsb3Blci55YWwhvby5jb206ODAVEVpL2FydGlibGVzL2dicy9nYnMuaHRtbA==>

Yahoo! UI Library: Table of A-Grade Browsers

<http://www.unipeak.net/gethtml.php?url=aHR0cDovL2RldmVsb3Blci55YWwhvby5jb206ODAVEVpL2FydGlibGVzL2dicy9nYnNfYnJvd3Nlci1jaGFydC5odG1s>

W3Schools Browser Statistics

http://www.w3schools.com/browsers/browsers_stats.asp