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# Surfing gets personal

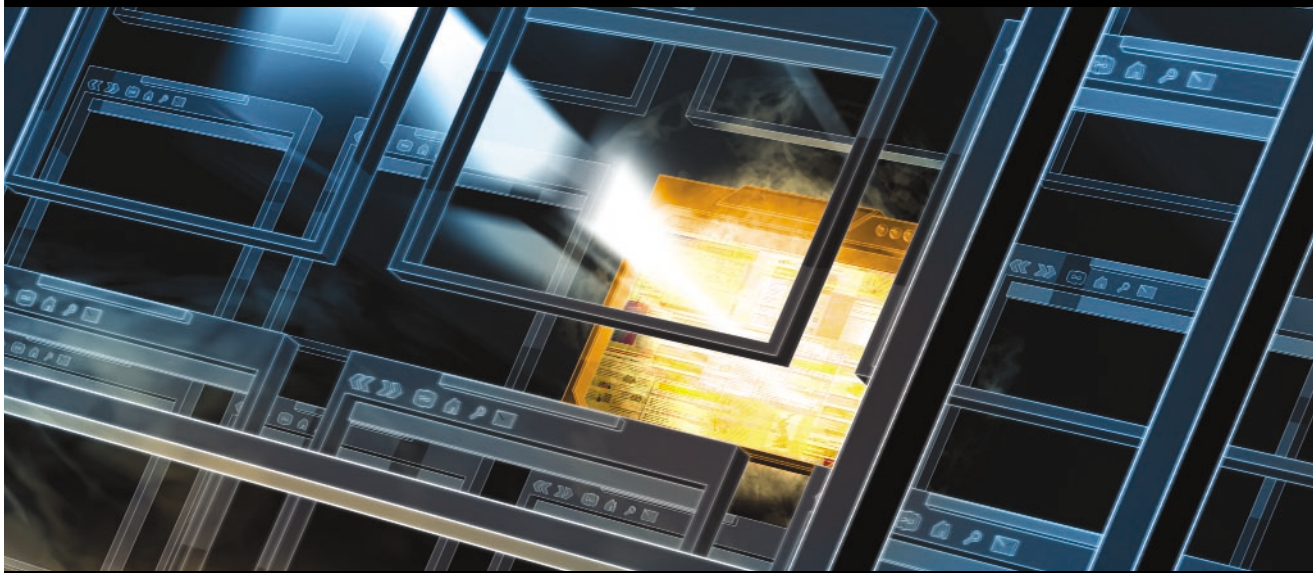
Browsing the Internet needn't be a case of following the crowd. Over the next few pages we illuminate the way to making your web experiences as unique as you are

**T**he web's attraction lies in the one billion-plus pages published to date, which is also its Achilles' heel. One of the most common questions asked by newcomers to the web is no longer 'how do I get online?' but rather 'where do I start?'. It's a valid question, and not just for newcomers but for all of us.

Being spoilt for choice is often no different to having no choice at all, which is why so many of us find ourselves blindly heading for the homepage of our chosen Internet service provider by default, still more are led to the web, Seattle style, by the guiding hand of Microsoft.

But it doesn't have to be that way. An increasing number of savvy web users have realised that, with a little effort, it's possible to customise your web experience, whether through a personal choice of portal, a homepage of preference, or simply some browser customisation to remove the cold impersonal edge: the payback is an empowered and more structured cyber experience. It isn't difficult to join the growing army of informed browsers who not only know where they want to go today, but also know how they are going to get there...

## PERSONALISATION HINTS AND TIPS



Here are a few words of advice to help you get personal:

- Use an Internet Chat client such as AOL/Netscape/Microsoft Messenger to build a buddy list of your online friends. Make sure you have the software running as you browse the web and you will get notified automatically should any of the people on your list happen to be online at the same time. Instant, private chat is then only a click or two away. You don't even have to interrupt your web browsing to do it.

- Some web portal sites not only personalise your web experience, but they also positively enhance it by bringing pretty impressive resources to your fingertips. News and weather reports may be handy, and horoscopes fun, but if you really want to impress your mates pop over to the Lycos portal ([www.lycos.co.uk](http://www.lycos.co.uk)) and check out the totally free web-to-mobile phone SMS text

message service. Type the phone number of the mobile you want to call, type your text message, hit send and it will arrive within a few minutes. Now that's cool!

- If you want the absolute quickest and most feature-packed of personal portal pages, then do away with the graphics and fancy stuff. If there is nobody to see it but you then there is nobody to impress. Use tables to make sure your text is well spaced and easy on both the eye and the mouse-clicking finger, and stuff your homepage full of useful links off-site. Think of it as being your very own index to your web, and call it our little secret!

- If you are creating a personal home page on your PC and storing lots of personal data on it then you will want to keep it safe from prying eyes, especially those trying to sneak a look from outside, on the web. Install a personal firewall and put the shields up against hackers and attackers. Either opt for

free software such as ZoneAlarm ([www.zonelabs.com](http://www.zonelabs.com)) or pay a few quid for a full-blown commercial choice such as BlackICE Defender ([www.networkice.com](http://www.networkice.com)).

Once you've mastered creating your own web experience through a personalised homepage, why not share it with others? After all, Yahoo! started as a collection of bookmark links on a computer in a student's bedroom which ended up getting shared with a few friends, and look where that ended up. A personal approach to web browsing will prove most popular when there is a theme, be that a hobby or specialised subject matter, or maybe just something specific to your family. Build it in the same way as your private portal, but do so online using a free web hosting and page creation service such as Freeservers ([www.freeservers.com](http://www.freeservers.com)) or Yahoo GeoCities ([geocities.yahoo.com](http://geocities.yahoo.com)) instead of your hard drive.

So where do you start if you want to release your own small piece of net navigational nirvana? That is also a question of personal choice but, having said that, the personalisation process can be split into three broad camps: client customisation, server-side portal configuration and client-side portal configuration. These can be mixed and matched according to personal preference.

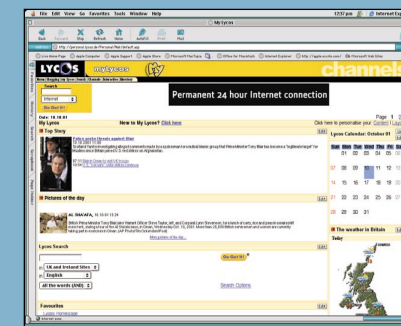
### Client customisation

Client customisation is simply the process of configuring your web browser to suit you. By spending some time exploring your browser preferences (whether your preferred browser is Internet Explorer, Netscape or Opera) you will be rewarded with software that works the way that you, rather than its developers, want it to. One obvious candidate for change is to set the browser 'home page' to something of your choosing rather than Microsoft or Netscape HQ, even a blank page if you want the quickest loading of the software. You could point the home page to a customised online portal page or

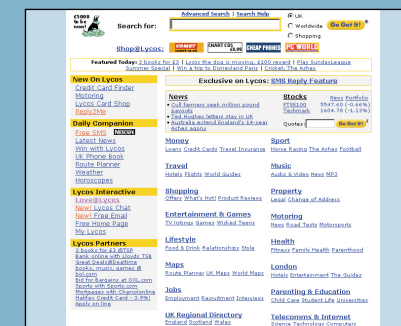
perhaps your locally stored favourites folder, and with one simple click you will have changed the look and feel of your browser. Next time you go online you are guaranteed to start surfing from your chosen Internet gateway.

You can also change the user interface by adding or removing toolbar buttons; creating a 'links' toolbar of sites from your favourites file or even adding new toolbars such as the Google search bar and the Internet Explorer 'radio' bar and more. Netscape and Opera allow you to change the whole appearance, colour schemes, buttons, user interface, all in one fell swoop using downloadable 'skins' that wrap around the existing interface at the click of your mouse. There are even utilities out there such as IE Personalizer ([accesscodes.hypermart.net](http://accesscodes.hypermart.net)) that will hack beneath the surface of the browser to make changes usually restricted to ISPs and big corporations – replace the MSIE logo with one of their own, add personal branding messages to the title bar, even drop some 'wallpaper' behind the toolbars. Yet while these changes do undoubtedly impact upon your web

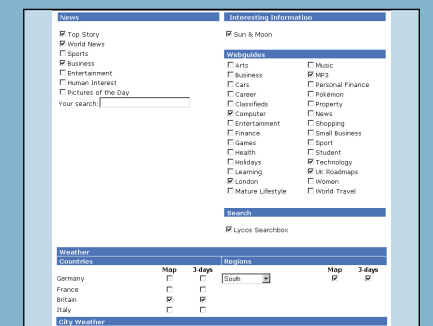
## HOW TO PERSONALISE A WEB PORTAL



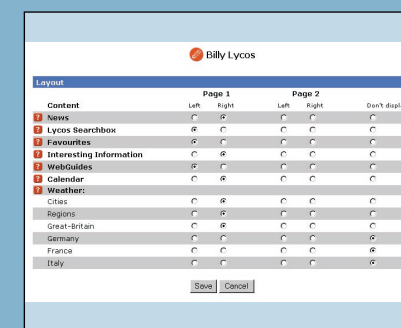
**1** Web portals combine search engine and directory resources with information services such as news and weather reports, SMS text messaging, motorway route planning, horoscopes, email, chat and a host of other things designed to ensure you always access the web through this same gateway. Luckily you don't have to put up with the clutter of stuff that's of no interest, as most portals lead the way in the personalisation stakes.



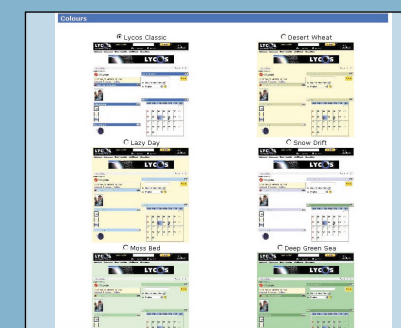
**2** It isn't that there is anything wrong with the Lycos ([www.lycos.co.uk](http://www.lycos.co.uk)) portal as it is served up by default. It's just that it's a little lacking in flair, and there is too much on the page that is not of interest to you so gets in the way of what is. Luckily Lycos has thought of this, and provides a simple solution in the very customisable My Lycos service, which can be found tucked away on the left in the 'Lycos Interactive' menu.



**3** Start by choosing the content that you want to see on your 'My Lycos' portal page. Don't worry if you are not sure what something will be like, you can return as many times as you like and check/uncheck boxes until you get the balance just right. Watch out for odd bugs, such as the way we needed to choose the city three items above the one we really wanted in the weather report section to get the right one to appear on the page.



**4** The layout of the screen is horrendously confusing, and we are sure Lycos could have come up with a better way of doing this. But again, trial and error is the only way forward. Whether something looks better on the left or right of the screen is a matter of personal taste, but whether it appears on the first or second page should be dictated solely by need.



**5** Colour selection is always good for a laugh, and unfortunately your personal preferences don't get too much of a shout here – instead it's a small dive into someone else's lack of taste. In fairness to the Lycos designers they have been careful to choose colour schemes that complement the content, rather than allow the user's choice make text difficult to read, for example. We suggest trying all seven options, it only takes a couple of minutes to cycle through them all and choose your favourite.



**6** And here you have it, a completely personal view of the Lycos portal that is totally different from the default service style. Uncluttered, colourful, and attractive to the eye – but more importantly it contains only the information and services we are interested in. As long as you don't delete the Lycos 'cookie' file, your preferences will remain between sessions and you'll see this every time you connect to the My Lycos portal.

experience, they are just cosmetic. To go further and bring personalised content into play, you have to look at option two, server-side portal configuration.

### Portal personalisation

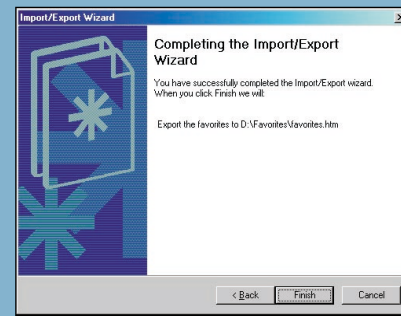
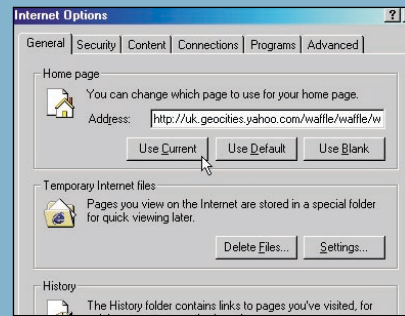
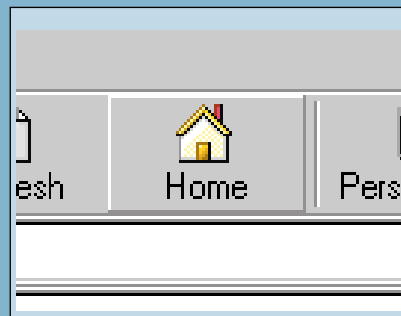
There are plenty of these fixed starting point web 'gateways' out there, indeed they were the next big thing a couple of years ago. Yet portals are neither gone nor forgotten, they are that rare exception – a big thing that has grown to fill the marketplace demand. Smaller players have, inevitably, fallen by the wayside to leave a handful of major portals that are now really very polished performers indeed.

It should come as no surprise that the services which survived the fallout were those already providing search and directory services as well as content-rich news and information provision. Combine the two with a fully user-customisable interface and you get into portal perfection. Microsoft, Netscape, Yahoo, Excite and Lycos, to name but a few, have got the balance between content and configurability just right. If you don't want a horoscope on your portal page, no problem – get rid of it. If you do want local news and weather reports, fine, just add them. Don't like the colour scheme – change it, don't like the layout – OK, redesign it.

### QUICK TIP

If using free, prewritten, JavaScript or HTML code – to be cut and pasted into your existing home page source code – be sure to carefully check the licence wording first to ensure that free really does mean free for your usage requirements.

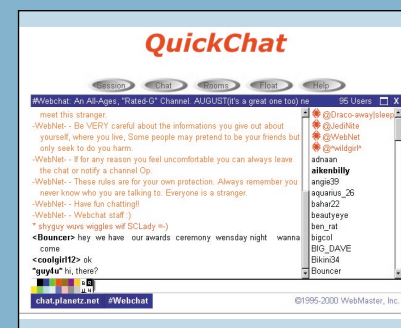
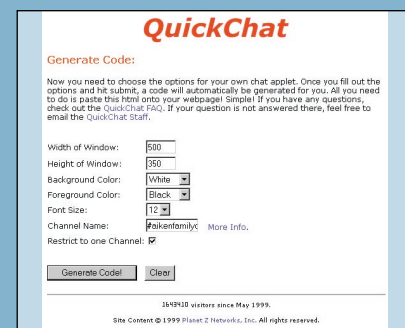
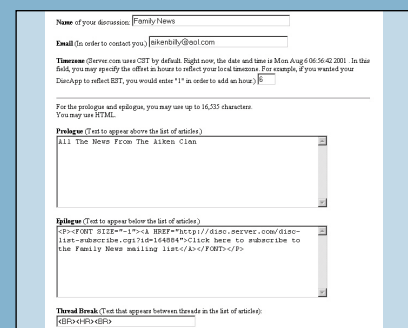
## HOW TO PERSONALISE YOUR HOME PAGE



**1** A homepage of your own doesn't have to be one of those hobby-led, pet-describing, so-so affairs. It could be a truly personal page, just for you, with links to your favourite sites, useful tools and private chat areas. Some people don't even bother publishing it on the web, but instead access it straight from their hard drive. The choice is yours, but here are some helpful suggestions you might want to consider.

**2** Make sure your browser points at your own web page as its default 'home page'. Browse to your home page first, or load the file if you want to use a locally stored page from your hard drive, and then go to Tools, Internet Options and click on the 'Use Current' button. Now, when IE starts or when you click the Home button in the toolbar it will load your home page. Netscape Navigator requires you to go to the page in question, go to Edit, Preferences and then click on the Use Current Page option.

**3** Turn your Favourites folder contents into a single HTML file, link to it from your personalised home page, and you can access it from any browser and more importantly anywhere with web access. The quickest method is to use the File, Export option in Internet Explorer and choose to save the Favourites folder as an HTML format file which you can tidy up using web page editing software to display as you like best.



**7** Fill in the form, making sure to choose a suitable group name and descriptions. Don't forget to adjust the timezone as well, Server.com is in the CST zone so you'll need to add six hours to get it right for GMT. Wait for the password and account details to appear in your mailbox, and then a simple link from your homepage opens the forum which is hosted at Server.com saving you space and resources. The only downside is a banner ad that will run to subsidise the fact that you get it for free.

**8** One step up from thread-based discussion forums in the personalisation stakes is a realtime chat facility. Services such as the Java applet based QuickChat ([www.quickchat.org](http://www.quickchat.org)) are quick, easy and free to set up. You can safely leave anything you are not sure of to the default settings, but channel name and background colour should be personalised at the very least.

**9** Fill in the forms, cut and paste the provided code snippet into your homepage HTML source code and you have a chat client of your own, right off the page. Well, it is hosted by QuickChat, and a Java applet runs the chat room, but you know what we mean. Obviously, anyone you want to chat to will also need to be using the QuickChat service.

### QUICK TIP

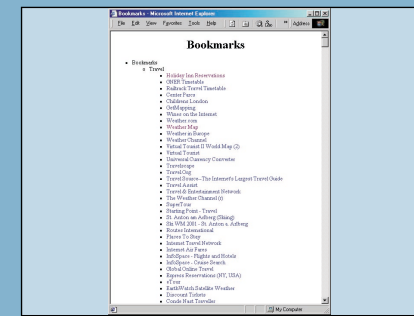
Don't get caught out by Microsoft FrontPage. Drag-and-drop creation of advanced features is appealing until you discover that the required 'FrontPage Server Extensions' are not supported by your ISP or web host – and so the features don't actually work.

The degree to which you can change the look and feel of a page will vary from portal to portal, and it is a matter of trying them all until you find one that suits you. You will have to make sacrifices: namely you give up personal information to register with the services and it will take more time to load a fully loaded portal when you make a web connection – an important consideration if you are using one of the big names that will be home to millions of other web users as well.

### Client-side portal creation

Which brings us on to the third way, the one we cryptically cloaked in the description 'client-side portal creation' but

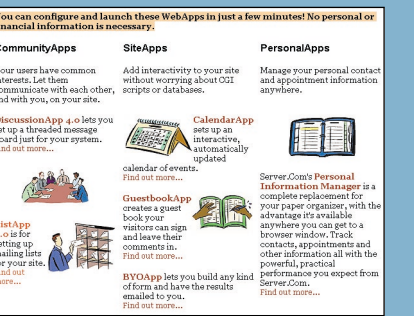
really refers to nothing more than a portal page that you create yourself, for your use only, and 'publish' onto your own hard drive. Yes, it sounds a little Heath-Robinson at first, but when you start to think about it everything makes perfect sense. You get to design the layout exactly as you want, use one of the many free or cheap drag-and-drop style HTML editing packages to build what is essentially just another web page. Include the URLs of your favourite websites, add free web resources to mimic the content you most cherish from the professional portal pages – grab a free custom news feed from Moreover ([www.moreover.com](http://www.moreover.com)), Weather reports from OnlineWeather ([www.onlineweather.com](http://www.onlineweather.com)), search engine



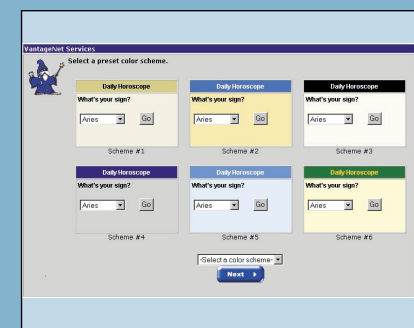
**4** Better still, download the old but gold, and totally free, Columbine Bookmark Merge utility from: [home.earthlink.net/~garycramblitt](http://home.earthlink.net/~garycramblitt). This converts your Favourites folder into HTML and gives you plenty of options for formatting, which in most cases negates the need to fiddle. It also enables you to merge your Favourites with Netscape Bookmarks and the Opera Hotlist if, like us, you have web browser software all over the place, to create one big list.



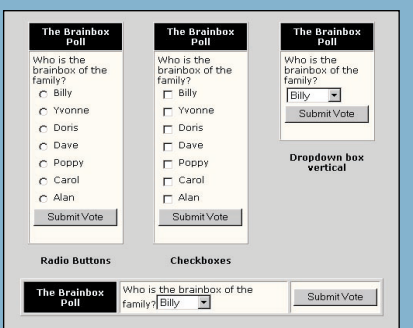
**5** Adding a search engine function to your homepage isn't hard or costly, even if you choose the best – Google. Use its WebSearch service at [www.google.com/services/free.html](http://www.google.com/services/free.html). Register with Google and then simply cut and paste the provided HTML into your homepage source code. The SiteSearch is restricted to sites that are already indexed in the Google database, so if you are creating a personal page for your use only this feature won't be available (but then neither will you need it).



**6** A message forum, bulletin board, newsgroup-style facility is easily added to your homepage and can be a great way to keep the whole family in touch with what's happening. There are plenty of free options available but perhaps the easiest to use and quickest to get running is 'DiscussionApp', which is just one of many free resources from Server.com ([www.server.com](http://www.server.com)) and literally takes just minutes to organise.



**10** How about adding a daily horoscope feature? It's maybe not the most essential of items, but is certainly individual, whether it's for your own private use or to add that personal touch to your website. The best we have found is a simple small box that allows you to choose the star sign from a dropdown menu. It's free to use, easy to configure (a web wizard is used) and install (HTML cut and paste) and it's free from FreeTools ([www.freetools.com](http://www.freetools.com))



**11** Sticking with the fun approach to personalisation for a moment, everyone likes polls and adding a polling facility to a family homepage is bound to get people interested. Apart from anything else, the results should lead to increased chat in your family chat room! Also from FreeTools ([www.freetools.com](http://www.freetools.com)) it's as easy to add as the horoscope feature, and even more customisable – you can even choose from a number of poll interface styles.



**12** Possibly the most personal addition to any homepage – your own domain. They're no longer expensive to buy or best left to the highly technical. You just point and click on a website and it costs next to nothing. Most will even set up forwarding so all email and web page requests for the new name are sent to your existing mailbox and homepage addresses. Easily ([www.easily.co.uk](http://www.easily.co.uk)) offers co.uk domains with free email and website forwarding for £9.99 and nothing more to pay for two years.

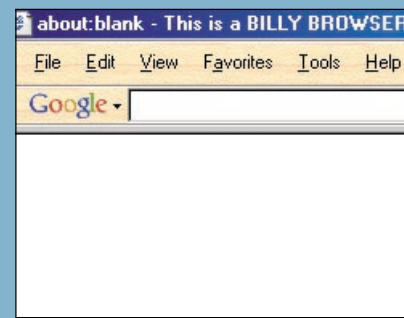
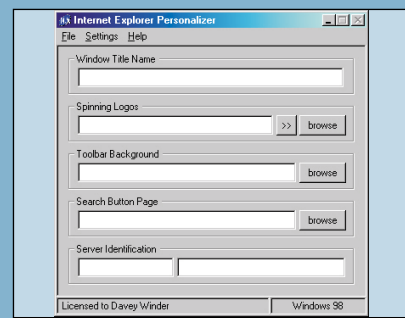
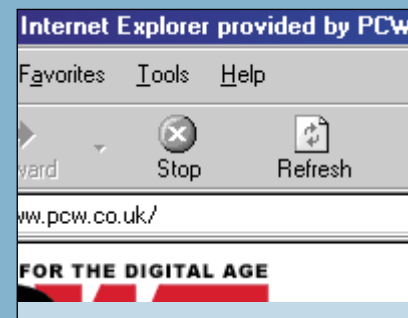
### QUICK TIP

**Corporate customisation**  
In the corporate world, at least as far as retail and service-driven sites are concerned, web personalisation comes down to one thing – how can you make the customer come back for more and increase the spend per visit figure? In the boardroom it is referred to as CRM (customer relationship management) and, while this is a highly complex subject that would need a feature of its own to cover in depth, we can scratch beneath the surface and reveal simple customising tricks of the trade at work.

Nearly all commercial sites employing any degree of personalisation will make use of cookies. Oft spoken about in

Don't mistake naff design disasters for personalisation masterpieces. Feel free to be creative and individual, but do NOT use flashing text, scrolling star field backgrounds, or clashing neon colour schemes.

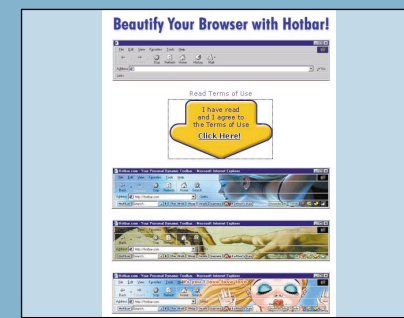
## HOW TO PERSONALISE YOUR BROWSER



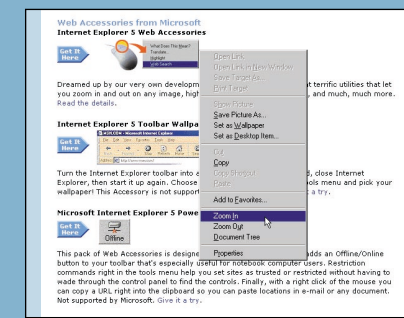
**1** You don't have to stop at customising your web page, the software you use to view it can get the personal touch as well. Here are our favourite browser beauty tips.

**2** The height of corporate capitulation is to use a web browser displaying the Microsoft 'e' logo and a title bar proclaiming 'Internet Explorer Supplied By The Big Name ISP Ltd'. Until recently getting rid of this stuff meant either hacking the Registry, which tends to put off most users, or having access to the IE Administrator's Kit (IEAK) which means being either a Microsoft developer or corporate client. That was until the advent of a rather nifty bit of software called IE Personalizer.

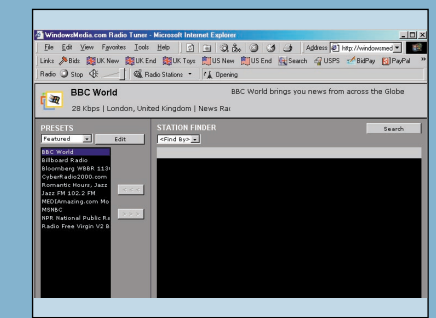
**3** Download IE Personalizer from AccessCodes Software ([accesscodes.hypermart.net](http://accesscodes.hypermart.net)) and use to de-brand your copy of Internet Explorer. And if you want to have a little fun you can then add your own 'branding' in just a few minutes. Don't worry, you can go back to the basic browser by clicking on the 'default' option in the Configuration menu. But you have to admit, it does look more personal this way.



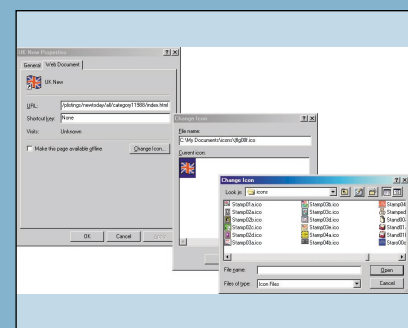
**4** One of the features of Internet Personalizer is a toolbar background 'wallpaper' feature. But it only comes with a handful of schemes to choose from. Expand your toolbar horizons with Hotbar ([www.hotbar.com](http://www.hotbar.com)) which has a choice of more than 57,000 toolbar 'skins', plenty in dubious taste, or no taste at all for that matter. You do have to install the Hotbar software before being able to make the colour scheme changes though.



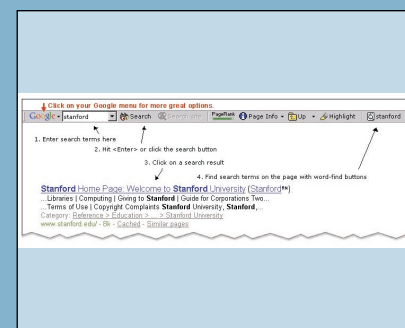
**5** Microsoft ([www.microsoft.com/windows/ie/WebAccess/default.asp](http://www.microsoft.com/windows/ie/WebAccess/default.asp)) has a surprisingly decent range of personalisation add-ons for Internet Explorer. Everything from toolbar wallpaper, customised additional toolbar services, and a 'web accessories' pack that adds features such as text highlighting and the ability to zoom images in and out on the browser screen.



**6** Of course, you can add your own toolbars to Internet Explorer, just right-click on an existing toolbar and choose from the menu. The 'radio' bar lets you select and control Internet radio broadcasts, while 'links' shows the contents of your Favourites links folder. In this example you can see an eBay links bar, which customises an online auction experience.



**7** Don't forget that you can customise the main Internet Explorer toolbar by right-clicking over it, choosing Customise and then adding/deleting buttons etc. Placing buttons in a toolbar is just a matter of 'right-click dragging' them around to the desired location. You can also change the appearance of your Links toolbar by right-clicking over individual buttons and selecting Preferences. Changing button icons can make all the difference to your browser.



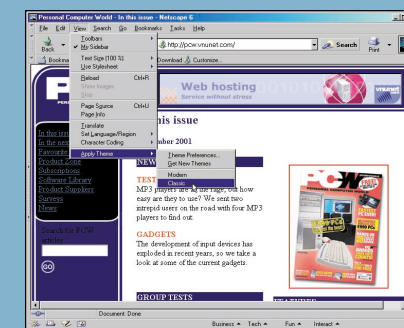
**8** Third-party toolbars are also available, news tickers and stock quote services (mainly US focused) seem to rule this roost. However, one that is worth downloading is the Google Search Toolbar ([toolbar.google.com](http://toolbar.google.com)) that not only lets you search the king of search engines without connecting first, but adds tools for searching the newsgroup and directory services, a search history feature and a useful site search that only searches within the site you are visiting at the time.



**9** Change the way you view web pages by toggling the different IE viewing modes on and off. You can free up additional screen space by toggling off toolbars simply by right-clicking over a toolbar area and unchecking the menu items. Even quicker, jump into full-screen 'kiosk' mode and release the largest amount of screen space by turning off all but the most essential navigation buttons. And it couldn't be easier, just use the F11 key to toggle between normal and full-screen modes.



**10** We've saved perhaps the biggest personalisation to last, using an alternative to Microsoft Internet Explorer. Netscape remains popular, and the new version 6 browser comes with a radically different look and feel to both its earlier, very successful, incarnations and Microsoft IE. However, so much has changed both on the surface and under the skin, that it needs to be treated as a 'new' browser – and will need some getting used to.



**11** If you prefer the look of the old Netscape but want to keep the added whizz-bang functionality of the new, then that can easily be achieved. Go the View menu and click on Apply Theme where you should choose the Classic option. While here, if you want to try some different themes (skins by another name) the Get New Themes option takes you to Netscape skin central where you can preview, download and skin up to your heart's desire.



**12** The rising star of alternative browsers is Opera. A Norwegian product, Opera is small and fast and includes the 'composer' feature. This lets you customise your copy of the software – from button images on toolbars, interface 'skins', adding live HTML content into a small window under the Hotlist bookmark sidebar, even creating your own splash screen when the software starts. You can also get an executable file so you can share your custom browser with family and friends.

### QUICK TIP

Avoid using too many 'free' add-on resources on one page if they are all supported by banner advertising. You don't want your carefully created individualism to drown in a sea of commercialism.

conspiracy theorist terms, cookies are pretty harmless text files that are created on the web server side but stored on the client side – in other words on your PC. The cookie file contains basic personal information such as who you are and your user details if a site requires registration, but it can also contain flags that show when you last visited the website, which pages you looked at, how long you spent there and what services or goods you purchased.

When you connect to a website a request is sent to your browser for the cookie, which is uploaded and examined on the server side. Your activities are then written to it and when you leave the site it is downloaded again to sit on your

computer. It is the cookie that allows a company to greet you by name, save your preference between one visit and another, even customise the layout of the web pages you are viewing.

But they can be a lot more clever than just that. Take collaborative filtering, for example. This will note what a user does and make recommendations based upon the history that builds up. If you visit a book shop and consistently purchase science fiction titles, the trend is spotted and you may see special offers about that genre, but not about cooking because you have never bought a cookery book. More impressive yet is when the collaboration kicks in

between varied users who don't know each other and probably never will: Customer A buys a CD by Celine Dion and another by Shania Twain, Customer B buys Celine Dion and The Offspring, Customer C buys Shania Twain and The Offspring – when customer A next visits they are offered The Offspring as an unlikely choice of listening pleasure considering their past purchases, but the collaborative links are there and the system does, amazingly, work very well indeed.

Finally, the same type of filtering can be used to track where you go when browsing a site, and tailoring your navigation options accordingly, steering you towards certain

services or products that your 'click-trail' suggests you might be interested in.

Web personalisation is about more than just prettying up a portal page or messing around with your own local start-up homepage: it is really about experiencing the web at its best, as you want it to be rather than how some faceless suit somewhere dictates it should be. You can embrace the true spirit of the Internet, that of a global community of individuals – and it's a lot easier, and certainly cheaper, than you might imagine. Our workshops are just the beginning, but hopefully they will spur you on to investigate further, experiment more, and release the real web experience within... **PCW**

### QUICK TIP

Invest in the ultimate personal add-on, a domain name of your own. Now cheap and easy to own, they can be set up so that all requests to your personal web address are forwarded to your existing homepage at Yahoo GeoCities or wherever.