

TOOLBOX – BrowserHawk 9.0

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In-Depth Browser Analysis

The lack of control over the end user's environment greatly complicates designing Web sites. Visitors to your Web site are likely to have different operating systems, different browsers, different screen resolutions, and different browser settings. A well-designed Web site should be able to determine whether a user's browser supports the site's minimum system requirements, and display a message indicating such rather than letting the user interact with a site that was not designed to support their setup.

When a browser requests a Web page, it sends along with the request a User-Agent string identifying the type and version of the browser and the operating system. This User-Agent string can then be examined by the server application to determine the baseline functionality for the particular browser. For example, from the User-Agent string you might determine that a user is visiting with Microsoft Internet Explorer[®] 5.0 on Windows[®] XP—a browser that supports cookies and JavaScript.

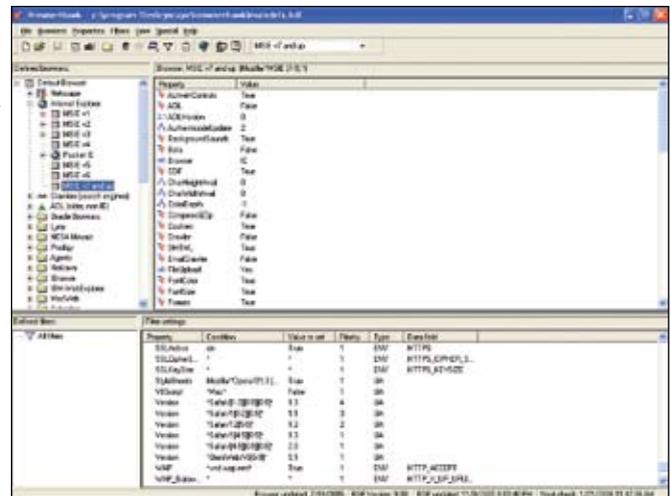
ASP.NET includes a list of User-Agent strings and their capabilities, which can be programmatically referenced through the Request.Browser property. While the Request.Browser property provides some usefulness, it suffers from two main drawbacks. First, the information that ASP.NET uses that ties a browser's User-Agent to its baseline capabilities is only updated when a new version of ASP.NET ships. In the meantime Mozilla may have released a new browser, or Internet Explorer 7.0 may have come out of beta, thereby introducing new User-Agent strings that are not fully known by ASP.NET. Second, the browser capabilities in ASP.NET only list the baseline functionality for the browser and do not take into account any settings changes made by the user.

To perform more in-depth browser analysis, you'll need to turn to a third-party component, such as **BrowserHawk 9.0**, by **cyScape Inc.** With just a couple of lines of code, BrowserHawk can determine not only the basic browser capabilities—the browser type, major and minor version, whether it supports JavaScript, and so

on—but also more detailed, extended properties, such as whether the user has disabled JavaScript support, the browser's width and height, the time zone difference between the client and server, whether the user is blocking popups, whether Flash, Acrobat, or other software is installed, and so on.

BrowserHawk uses Browser Definition Files (BDF) that define expressions that match against known User-Agent strings. These files include matches not only for browser User-Agents, but also User-Agents for common search engine spiders. The BrowserHawk Editor makes searching and modifying the BDF list as easy as pointing and clicking. Furthermore, to ensure your BDF information stays up to date, cyScape maintains this information on their server, and BrowserHawk can be configured to periodically download this data.

Other nice features include the ability to log browser details to a database without having to write a lick of code, and being able to determine a visitor's connection speed and provide more accurate estimates as to how long it will take a user to download a particular file.



While BrowserHawk's gaggle of features is impressive, what's most pleasing about working with this tool is its ease of use. Installation is a snap, working with the BrowserHawk Editor is intuitive, and determining a visitor's capabilities can be accomplished with just a short few lines of code. To top it off, BrowserHawk is available for Web sites using classic ASP, ASP.NET, ColdFusion, and JSP.

If you need a foolproof way to determine or log your visitors' browser capabilities, BrowserHawk may provide the support you're looking for.

Price: \$524 for the Professional Edition and one year of updates.
www.cyscape.com

All prices were confirmed at press time and are subject to change.
The opinions expressed in this column are solely those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the opinions of Microsoft.

BrowserHawk[®]
Ensure a Flawless Web Experience