Google and Mozilla Announce New Privacy Features

By TANZINA VEGA

Add two more Internet browser makers to the list of companies planning to offer Web users new ways to control how their personal data is collected online.

On Monday, Mozilla and Google announced features that would allow users of the Firefox and Chrome browsers to opt out of being tracked online by third-party advertisers. The companies made their announcements just weeks after the Federal Trade Commission issued a report that supported a “do not track” mechanism that would let consumers choose whether companies could monitor their online behavior.

In a blog post by Alex Fowler, Mozilla's technology and privacy officer, the company unveiled a proposed feature for its Firefox browser that would send a signal to third-party advertisers and commercial Web sites indicating that a user did not want to be tracked. The mechanism, being called a Do Not Track HTTP header, would rely on companies that receive the information to agree not to collect data.

The approach differs from other options currently available to users that rely on cookies or user-generated lists. In December, Microsoft announced a feature called Tracking Protection for Internet Explorer 9 that would rely on lists that users create that indicate which sites they do not want to share information with.

“We believe the header-based approach has the potential to be better for the web in the long run because it is a clearer and more universal opt-out mechanism than cookies or blacklists,” said Mr. Fowler in the blog post.

In a statement, the chairman of the Federal Trade Commission, Jon Leibowitz, said: “Mozilla’s initiative is to be commended. It recognizes that consumers want a choice about who is tracking their movements online, and it's a first step toward giving consumers choice about who will have access to their data. It also signals that Do Not Track options are technically feasible.”

Google’s approach relies on a browser extension, or plug-in, called Keep My Opt-Outs that will work with all versions of its Chrome browser. The extension would allow users to permanently opt out of being tracked by online advertisers who already offer opt-out options through self-regulation programs, like the Digital Advertising Alliance and the Network Advertising Initiative.

In a blog post by Google, the company said it would offer the code for the extension to developers on an open-source basis and that it planned to make the feature available for other browsers in the future.

Regarding the Google announcement, an F.T.C. spokeswoman said, “We’re pleased that Google is engaged in the process, but Mozilla and Microsoft are clearly steps ahead.”

In a statement, Mike Zaneis, the senior vice president and general counsel for the Interactive Advertising Bureau, an organization that supports industry self-regulation, said the Mozilla feature would require companies to voluntarily recognize a consumer’s choice and that it was still unclear how users could protect their privacy.

“The first analogy that comes to mind is, if a tree falls in the woods and no one is there to hear it, does it make a sound? Well, Google has ensured an audience to hear the sound of the tree falling by working with the established industry mechanism,” Mr. Zaneis said.