GET THE SPIN

Dear Linux Magazine Reader,

Joe Casad, Editor in Chief

We've begun a new survey to get input from our readers on topics to cover in the coming year. If you have a minute, pay a visit to *http://www.linux-magazine.com/survey* to let us know your interests. We'll donate US$ 5 to the Free Software Foundation for each completed survey.

In the meantime, while we wait for these results to roll in, I decided to do a little fact finding of my own. Have you ever wondered what you would find if you clicked on one of those "Get the Facts" links? Microsoft's "Get the Facts" campaign is where they supposedly make their case about how they are better than Linux. Most Linux users never click that link. No Linux user wants another Linux user to sneak up on them while they are visiting the "Get the Facts" site.

Linux users consider the information at this site unreliable, but when someone is tossing factoids all over the Internet, it doesn't help much to follow them around muttering that their factoids are unreliable. In the court of public opinion, the only way to fight detail is with detail. And since most of us don't want to click on Charon's boat to enter this netherworld of "Get the Facts," I thought I would volunteer to do it myself.

I can't tell you everything in this scant 600 words, but I can fill you in on the three "Featured White Papers and Research Reports" highlighted on the home page.

The first is a paper is titled "Understanding Reliability of Evolving Systems." The paper is attributed to a group called Security Innovation. In a blurb below the link, Microsoft says the paper "…found a Windows-based solution was more reliable than a Linux-based solution as business needs grew over a scenario based on a 1-year life cycle." Inside, the author states that he doesn't like the conventional definition for what an IT professional would call reliability, and he proposes a radical re-definition of the term.

The author's intention may be innocent enough. He attempts to measure the downtime and dependency issues over an extended simulation that included upgrades and modifications to the systems. The study compares a Windows-based environment with a Suse Linux Enterprise Server environment. The systems were patched at 1 month intervals, and at the end of the 1 year simulation, the Windows 2000 server was upgraded to Windows 2003, while the SLES 8 server was upgraded to SLES 9. The executive summary doesn't mention the fact that the transition from SLES 8 to 9 included a move from the Linux 2.4 kernel to the Linux 2.6 kernel – a much more significant change than the upgrade from Windows 2000 to Windows 2003.

The other papers at the site effervesce with similar ambiguity. One is a report from the Gartner group called "Cost and Benefits Still Favor Windows Over Linux Among Midsize Businesses." If you read the actual report, it is not particularly flattering for Microsoft, essentially concluding that businesses falling within the target profile should stay with Windows because it is too much trouble to switch to Linux. (How is that for a marketing slogan? "Windows: You're stuck with it!")

The third "featured paper" is part 2 of a study by the infamous Yankee Group. When I clicked on this latest report, I was surprised to find that the report readily admits IT managers rate Linux as more secure than Windows, but the authors find hope in the fact that the difference is not as great as it was last year.

To summarize these leading facts at the "Get the Facts" site:

1. Windows is more reliable than Linux under a new definition of the term "reliable."
2. You're stuck with Windows because changing to Linux would be too much effort.
3. Windows security is not as inferior to Linux security as it used to be.

Of course, all these weak arguments are rendered powerful through the magic of "TCO," a term that can mean absolutely anything you want. All sides invoke TCO as a cure-all for healing the weaknesses of their marketing positions. It is kind of like the secret potion that Lucy puts on people in *The Chronicles of Narnia*.

Joe