

BIG BOX

Dear Linux Magazine Reader,

Like any self-respecting Linux journalist, I'm often predisposed to take Microsoft to task. For the record, I do manage to spread it around, with occasional reflections on Apple and Google, because I truly believe our universe has room for more than one evil empire. But Microsoft is still the easiest mark. It used to be easy to make fun of Microsoft because they were so formidable and vast. Now it is easy to make fun of them because they get it wrong so often, and it is downright amusing to see so much hype and media attention going to such inelegant products.

The latest of those products is Windows 8. I won't embark upon a full review of Windows 8 in this setting, but suffice it to say, I fall in with the legions of unimpressed users, reviewers, and shareholders who have already made their voices known. The vaunted new Start Screen looks like a sea of billboards to me, with no escape for the weary eye save to find the billboard you need and dive through it. It is hard to figure out how to even shut the system down, and the task of switching the default browser from Bing to Google requires several obscure steps through unnecessary dialogs. Even Microsoft doesn't seem to have high hopes for Windows 8. Despite the short time the new Windows has been on the market, Redmond recently announced that they are already working on a system to replace it.

If I were an electronics store, I would not be stocking my shelves right now with an unimpressive system that has received many negative reviews, and that even the company that built it seems eager to replace. But I guess I'm not Best Buy. I went into a Best Buy recently, and *all* the laptop computers on their shelves were Windows 8 systems. They had a few assorted tablets with Android and iOS, but the portable PCs *all* had Windows 8. Staring down the row at 20 glowing Start Screens, I longed for the calm and sensible visual clarity of Times Square.

Best Buy has been struggling recently with a sagging stock price and big losses on the balance sheet. They just announced a US\$ 409 million loss for Q4 of 2012, and they just laid off 400 employees at their corporate headquarters. The experts blame the business model – an anachronistic big box store operating in a world of online retail – but maybe the real problem isn't the shape of the store (something they can't fix) but the shape of their business relationships, which reflect the marketing realities of 10 years ago.

In a recent commentary on the Windows 8 debacle, Woody Leonhard of InfoWorld [1] points out that, at Amazon, the

quintessential online retailer, the best-selling laptop actually runs Chrome OS, and the best-selling Windows tablet, a Dell Inspiron, actually runs Windows 7 despite the availability of a later Windows 8 alternative.

Still Best Buy has nothing on its mind but Windows 8. When I went to the Best Buy website and put ChromeOS in the search box, all it called up was a few links to D'Addario "Chromes" guitar strings. When I put in a space (Google actually spells it "Chrome OS," it picked up on the "OS" acronym and gave me lots of references to "Windows OS." (In the interest of full disclosure, I did turn up some Chrome OS systems at the online store by typing in *Chromebook*, but none of these seem to be getting any floor space in my town.)

Despite the problems with Windows 8, the fact is that Microsoft built it the way they wanted it. Monopolies turn into bureaucracies, and bureaucracies revolve around priorities such as planned obsolescence and management self-preservation rather than the simple business of pleasing the customer. The real question is when will Best Buy and other retailers wake up and join the new millennium? Several popular Linux distributions would be happy to work with them on building a pre-installed OEM version that could co-exist on the shelves with Chrome OS, Windows 7, and Windows 8 to offer real choice to potential customers. What's that called again when consumers get to make real choices ... oh yeah, a free market. ■■■

Joe

Joe Casad,
Editor in Chief



INFO

- [1] "With Windows Blue Rumored, the Windows 8 Fire Sale Begins": <http://www.infoworld.com/t/microsoft-windows/windows-blue-rumored-the-windows-8-fire-sale-begins-213424>