SHELF SPACE

Dear Linux Magazine Reader,

Joe Casad, Editor in Chief

Some months ago, the Linux world celebrated when Wal-Mart announced their stores would be selling the Everex gPC, a low-cost computer pre-installed with the gOS (an Ubuntu Linux derivative). Wal-Mart had already been selling the system online, and they decided to bring the product to their retail outlets. Just recently, however, the megalithic merchant announced that the test was over and they would no longer offer the gPC in their stores.

Bloggers and commentators quickly went to work on the decision – with much effort to defend Linux. Some mentioned that Wal-Mart was indeed able to sell out their original inventory, so at least some of their customers were interested. Others have brought up issues with how the computers were displayed or questioned whether the Internet-based applications included with gOS were viable without high-speed Internet.

Wal-Mart makes decisions like this all the time, though, and for reasons that are all their own. It would be vastly oversimplifying to reduce this story to a trial of desktop Linux. For one thing, it isn't clear that the public even knew Linux was part of the discussion. The description of the Everex gPC at the Wal-Mart website doesn't even mention Linux. The summary just states that the computer is "preinstalled with gOS" with no explanation of what gOS is. (Many Linux users probably don't even know what gOS is.) It is possible that this omission stems from some Linux trademark issue – even the gOS home page doesn't mention Linux – but such things are easily managed through careful wording. If the system really is based on Ubuntu, they ought to be able to say it.

By obscuring the connection between gOS and Linux, Wal-Mart lost the benefit of any buzz or excitement associated with the emerging Linux market. Their motivation may have been to distance themselves from the past reputation of Linux as a geek system, but failing to mention Linux deprives the shopper of any information at all that might be relevant to a purchase decision. Wal-Mart markets its own low-cost soft drink brand called Sam's Choice Soda, which they appear to keep around not for its exquisite taste but because it lets them undercut the price, and weaken the bargaining position, of Coke and Pepsi. For all the non-geek shopper knows, gOS is the operating system equivalent of Sam's Choice Soda.

Another problem is that Wal-Mart seems a bit squeamish about spelling out any tangible benefits of gOS (a.k.a. Linux) over Windows. One gets the impression this system is somehow less expensive, but if you were to infer that lower cost meant lower quality, the Wal-Mart website would offer little to change your mind. The site doesn't mention that gOS provides better security and requires fewer expenses for antivirus, anti-adware, and office software. Interestingly, one of the other gOS PCs available at the Wal-Mart site, the Everex 15.4" gBook laptop, mentions that gOS is "immune to viruses," which is at least a start, but this language is entirely missing from the gPC description. Why even sell a product if you're not going to spell out its advantages? This uncharacteristic lapse of marketing acumen from the world's largest retailer leaves the impression that the real story might be more about roughing up Microsoft than supporting Linux. The introduction of a Linux desktop system into an otherwise Windows-heavy shopping experience offers a challenge to Redmond, yet the coy silence regarding the true deficiencies of Windows saves a card to play later – or not play later, depending on the concessions these titans manage to exact from each other.

An interesting feature of gOS is its emphasis on the online Google application set. Throwing in this Google gambit adds yet another point of leverage. So the world's largest retail company, the world's largest software company, and the world's largest Internet search company are all in this somewhere. And where is Linux? Out of the spotlight for now, but still waiting behind the curtain.

Joe