

Evolving with Novell at Brainshare 2007

ECOSYSTEMS

Novell's new integration emphasis was on display at their annual Brainshare conference in Salt

Lake City, Utah.

BY JAMES STANGER

Engineers, marketers, managers, and sales reps met in Salt Lake City, Utah for Novell's annual Brainshare conference. This year's event emphasized virtualization, identity management, and interoperability (the code word for the Microsoft deal). As I walked the halls, I kept hearing the word "ecosystem." It was scripted for everyone, from Novell CEO Ron Hovsepian down to the Novell employees in the booths.

Novell seems interested in making a statement by using the term "ecosystem" instead of "community." Their own community of users and developers has existed for over 20 years, and they want their community – I mean, ecosystem – to work closely with the open source community, but they are also aware that they aren't the only player in the server room, and they want to be in a position to reach out to groups who may not fit so well with the open source definition of "community."

FUD Monger to Partner

When I saw Microsoft's name as a Platinum sponsor of the show, their big, black banner in the trade show pavilion, and their employees performing on the Brainshare stage, I thought "My how times have changed." Just two years ago, Microsoft hired a roving FUD-mobile to drive around the Brainshare block. Still, I wonder if this new reality is really so different. Novell has dealt with Microsoft before. Working with the open source community has been difficult for Novell, because partners in their channel are still lamenting the fall of

NetWare, and long discussions of the politics, poetics, and theology of the GPL do not play so well to the NetWare crowd. It seems that, given the choice, Novell is willing to anger the open source community at this point to placate their sales channel.

Developments

Novell has been busy with putting a nice corporate sheen on some open source projects. For instance, Mark Reissig and James Tremblay created a thin client solution using the LTSP project and SLED 10. John Marciano and Brad Goubeaux at Keep IT Simple (KIS) Consulting told me about a similar project they were doing for the Windsor Unified school district in the San Francisco Bay Area.

I appreciated Bruce Perens' performance as a voice in the Novell wilderness, though for reasons he might not suspect. Speaking from a room at the Shiloh Inn outside of the actual Brainshare conference, he made his usual valid points about the GPL and Microsoft. Still, I sometimes got the impression Perens' was chagrined that Novell didn't ask him permission to make the deal. I wish he had focused more on the reasons why Novell's deal with Microsoft may not make business sense.

When I asked Novell Certification director Steve King to name the three most exciting developments at Novell (besides virtualization and identity management), he mentioned:

- Novell's deal with OpenCourseware Consortium <http://ocw.novell.com>
- SLED 10 – a true corporate Linux desktop
- Partnerships

In the midst of all these opinions, though, I was nevertheless able to find consensus

among former NetWare groupies, GPL advocates, and Brainshare attendees: the public is taking a "wait and see" approach. The latest changes to the GPLv3 draft apparently grandfather Novell's existing partnerships. Microsoft seems to be spouting FUD a little less often. Channel partners are slowly migrating from NetWare. It's all about execution now.

Novell feels that their strategy of going toe-to-toe against Microsoft did not fail because they didn't know how to market it; it failed because Novell ignored what their customers wanted: integration and choice. But the fact is, many other players in the open source community recognize the need for choice. The Linux Professional Institute (LPI), for example, just released Level 3 of their certification program, which assesses how to work in a heterogeneous environment. It seems that Novell and the open source community are finding real points of connection. Will these connection points be a source of friction? Once again, it's a wait-and-see game at this point. ■

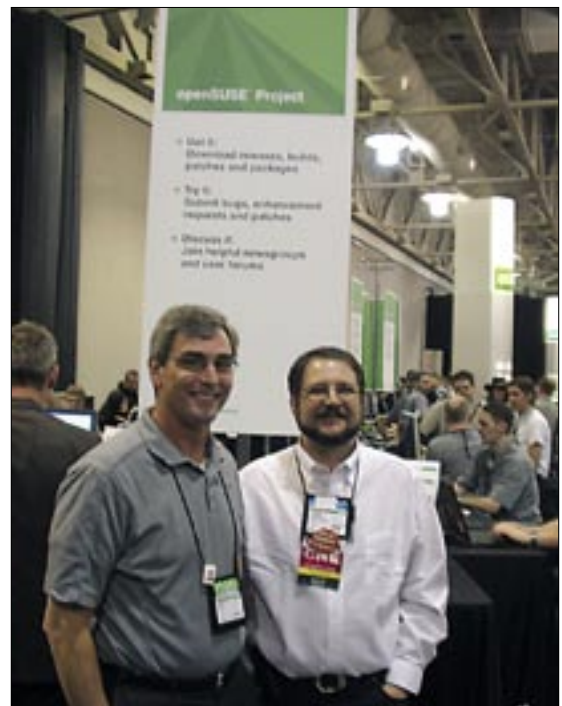


Figure 1: Mark Reissig and James Tremblay told me about their SLED/LTSP project.