

WHITE HATS AND RED HATS

Dear Linux Magazine Reader,



Joe Casad, Editor in Chief

A press release crossed my desk recently that caught my eye. That message was from Red Hat, and the headline called out in bold letters:

Red Hat Calls for Intellectual Property and Patent Reform

I was encouraged by this display of attitude from Red Hat, so I read on. You see, a few months ago, I used this space to take them to task for

their press relations. It seemed that, whenever a controversy erupted, corporate big guns like Novell and IBM were always there with a quote, riding like white knights to the aid of Open Source, while Red Hat appeared to be off somewhere else, tooling around setting up branch offices and signing licensing deals without much regard to any political context.

My criticism, I remind you, was not so much about what Red Hat *does* as it was about what what they *say* about what they do. To us in the media, a press release is more than a form of spam – it is an important dispatch from the battle lines of Open Source politics. A press release may not be able to show what a company is, but it is very good at showing how a company would like to be seen. My point was that Red Hat's competition – many of whom are relative latecomers to the scene – were stealing the limelight from Red Hat by investing their energies in a much higher public profile in the debates of the day.

In my February column, I suggested that this whole problem might have caught Red Hat by surprise – that they simply weren't prepared for a giant like Novell arriving in the middle of their habitat. However, one could also speculate that Red Hat's narrower focus might, indeed, reflect a deliberate strategy. This argument would follow the lines of the old adage that you don't have to prove what everybody already knows. Everyone knows Novell is a big, sober corporation, so they don't have to prove that. No one knows Novell is an Open Source company, so they have to demonstrate it by jumping into every Open Source debate and exuding a militant outlook.

On the other hand, everyone knows Red Hat is an Open Source company, so they don't have to prove it. Their challenge is to prove they are a big, sober corporation, and they show it by acting "responsible" and avoiding the appearance of being too rebellious. This, of course, may be giving Red Hat too much credit, but

the question of defining a public image may shed some light on how difficult it is to be Red Hat.

The recent press release, which referred to a speech by Red Hat Deputy General Counsel Mark Webbink at the Red Hat Summit in New Orleans, covered several topics, the most significant of which was the formation of the Fedora Foundation, a non-profit entity that will oversee future work on Fedora. (For more on the Fedora Foundation, see the Business News on page 10.)

The news that Red Hat is passing control of Fedora to a non-profit foundation may prove one of the more interesting developments of the year – and more significant, perhaps, than a hundred documents boldly stating "Corporation X Takes a Stand for Freedom." Of course, not everyone is convinced we'll see a truly independent Fedora – we'll have to wait and see on that part. But at least it gives us something to watch.

Oh yes, and about that speech: as Webbink told the crowd gathered in New Orleans, "Patents are not equal to innovation...More often than not, innovation occurs despite patents. What we observe today in the software industry is the use of patents to obtain marketshare, even when the marketshare has been obtained by anti-competitive means."

Good Red Hat, feel the force...

Joe

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