

# RANDOM

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COMMUNICATIONS WITH A PURPOSE

# THOUGHTS

## These thoughts are a little more random than usual

**T**he March issue this year is a collection of short items. Instead of a single, longer item that I spent more time developing, these items comprise a potpourri of thoughts that I hope you will find interesting and worth your time, even if each is more of a “sound bite” than a fully developed report.

I welcome your feedback!

### Newsweek speaks, Microsoft shudders

I don't know if that's true or not, but it made a cool sounding headline and that's all that counts these days, isn't it? Microsoft may say publicly that a little change in market share doesn't matter, but when market penetration drops from just shy of 100% to about 90% in less than 6 months, alarm bells should be ringing.

I was flipping through the January 24 issue of *Newsweek* and tucked in among news of tsunamis, mud slides, and John Ashcroft was a nearly-full-page article about Firefox, the browser I've been recommending since shortly before it moved from beta to release version.

#### 25,000,000 Firefox downloads

By late January, more than 17 million people had downloaded Firefox. A month later, the count had increased to 25 million. That still leaves Microsoft's market share for Internet Explorer around 90%, but a drop of several percentage points doesn't play well in Redmond.

What's interesting is that the people who are downloading Firefox are no longer just the computer geeks who can't bear to use the same applications as the *hoi polloi*. It's gone well beyond that. Now the *hoi polloi* are downloading Firefox. (Yes, I know “the” is redundant with *hoi polloi*.)

Not only that, they're telling others how much they like the way Firefox works. I can't help but think of Arlo Guthrie singing, *Can you imagine fifty people a day, I said fifty people a day walking in, singin' a bar of Alice's Restaurant, and walking out. And friends, they may think it's a movement. And that's what it is, the Alice's Restaurant Anti-Massacre Movement. And all you got to do to join is sing it the next time it comes around on the guitar.* That's the kind of marketing that's driving Firefox downloads.

I'm involved with an on-line discussion group for editors. The geekiness of this group varies from significant to nonexistent and I've heard from people at both ends of that spectrum who have downloaded Firefox. Many have also

decided to give Mozilla's e-mail application, Thunderbird, a spin, too. Thunderbird doesn't have a calendar or an address book, but it's a good e-mail application.

Compared to Microsoft's campus, the Mozilla Project's setup is somewhat Spartan. The group has about a dozen paid programmers. Most of the work is done by the open-source community, hundreds of programmers who donate their time to making Firefox better.

#### Is open-source better?

Definitely yes. And definitely no. Well, maybe.

One important consideration is the fact that Firefox doesn't have nearly as large a target painted on its back as Internet Explorer does. That's similar to what I say when it comes to security on the Mac. So maybe I should wish the Mozilla Project great success and hope that most people continue to use IE so the target will stay on Microsoft's browser.

Open-source software can have security holes and bugs, the same as commercial software. To some extent, the difference is in how programmers respond to these threats. Microsoft will schedule a meeting, analyze the threat, assign a team to develop specifications, assign a team to code the new specifications, assign a team to analyze the new code, assign a team to establish implementation of the new code, and .... well, you get the idea. The open-source gang will all look at the problem, independently develop solutions, and submit the solutions. Neither approach is better or worse than the other.

An open-source project such as Firefox or WikiTiki, each of which has attracted hundreds of talented programmers, will often produce an application that is as good as anything commercial developers will turn out. Open-source projects that attract 2 or 3 unemployed coders won't fare as well.

Open-source isn't magic. Neither is Microsoft's approach. Each is what it is.

And that's all there is.

### GMail might be the best webmail ever

I must admit that I detest Web-based e-mail. The interfaces are usually slow and keyboard shortcuts don't exist.

Google's GMail is the best Web-based e-mail I've seen: It has keyboard shortcuts, it offers 1GB of online storage, it can organize messages by labeling them manually or automatically, it includes a spam filter that claims to learn to recognize what you consider to be spam, and it's reasonably fast. But it's still a Web-based e-mail client.

After using GMail for several weeks, but not as my primary e-mail client, I can say that the folks at Google have done an excellent job. It's still a webmail application, though, and the limitations, when compared to full e-mail applications, are significant.

GMail's spam filter needs work, too. Instead of allowing less and less spam to reach my in-box over time, it's allowing more. Even though I routinely use the "Report Spam" button when spam appears in the in-box, I now see 10 to 15 spams per day instead of the 2 or 3 when I first started using GMail.

GMail does catch a lot of the spams it receives and throws them into the spam mailbox, but each day the service incorrectly identifies good messages as spam, too, and throws them into the spam box. As I report misidentified good messages as "not spam" and misidentified bad messages as "spam", GMail is supposed to learn. So far, it's not doing a good job in that regard.

The large storage GMail makes available, the cost (free), the ability to file messages by category, and the excellent search facility will be enough to win over a lot of users.

But it's still webmail.

As of today, anyone who wants to try GMail still needs an invitation. There are signs that this won't be true much longer, but if you'd like an invitation, just let me know and I'll send one along.

## IBMApple: Could it have been?

I was thinking the other day and that's always a bad way to start the day. Thinking is dangerous, after all. It's frowned on in some circles, but I still do it occasionally. I try not to think too much – just socially, you understand. It's a hard habit to give up entirely.

### I was thinking about IBM, Microsoft, and Apple

In the 1984 Super Bowl, Apple ran the ad that everyone still remembers 21 years later. The assumption was that it was an anti-IBM ad, but Apple has always denied that. Apple actually has more in common with the old (bad?) IBM than Microsoft does. IBM in the old (bad?) days sold proprietary software that ran on its proprietary hardware.

Today's Apple is a bit more open than it used to be. The company now uses mostly standard components for its computers, but on the software side everything is proprietary. I think a good case could be made showing parallels between Apple and IBM.

IBM, in an early nod to an open-source community that hadn't yet started to call itself that, made the PC architecture available to anyone who wanted it. Apple insisted on selling only machines and components that it controlled. Microsoft was part of IBM's open-source experiment from the beginning and made an operating system with hooks that allowed anyone to write applications for it.

*Thinking about that made my head hurt, so I tried thinking about something else.*

The something else turned out to be Apple and Microsoft, which differs slightly from thinking about IBM, Microsoft, and Apple. Apple once had an opportunity to buy Compaq. Western Union also once had an opportunity to purchase an invention by a guy named Alexander Graham Bell.

Why would Apple want to have anything to do with Compaq? What if the Apple had acquired Compaq? I felt another mental pain coming on, but decided to continue.

At the time, Compaq was challenging IBM as a hardware manufacturer. Combining Apple and IBM would have made Apple a huge player. Apple is today the largest computer manufacturer in the world (in units sold) because Apple is the only company that makes Apple computers. What if Apple also made PCs?

*By now I was sure that this was making my head hurt, so I tried thinking about something else.*

The something else turned out to be Apple and Microsoft (without IBM this time) – and why people seem to think that these companies are (and should be) natural enemies.

Microsoft is a software company; oh, they have their name put on mice (some prefer "mouses" for the plural of the computer variety) and keyboards, but their primary product is software: Operating systems, office productivity applications, and programming languages. You won't find a computer, an MP3 player, or a video screen with the name Microsoft on it.

Apple, on the other hand, is a hardware company. They have an operating system, but most of OS X is BSD Unix. Apple added a little piece that sits on top of Unix and provides a graphical user interface, but Apple's core strength is manufacturing desktop computers, notebook computers, media players, monitors, servers, and such.

Based on this analysis, I concluded that Apple and Microsoft should be friends.

*And that really made my head hurt!*

So I went out for a beer.

## A message from the FBI

The Federal Bureau of Investigation is concerned about e-mail messages that appear to come from the FBI.

The messages say that the user's Internet use has been monitored by the FBI's Internet Fraud Complaint Center and that they have accessed illegal websites.

It then suggests that the user open an attachment and answer questions. At this point, alarms should be going off in your brain. Never open an unexpected attachment.

The message, of course, is not from the FBI and attachment, of course, contains a virus that installs an application that gives a remote user access to your computer. Once the application has been installed, your computer checks in with the writer and announces that it's available for whatever illegal activity the writer has in mind.

The FBI asks that anyone who receives one of these messages report it to the Internet Crime Complaint Center at [www.ifccfbi.gov/](http://www.ifccfbi.gov/).

**on the market** by A.J. Stinnett

**CORNER**

"MANAGEMENT  
is getting things done through others.  
LEADERSHIP  
is how you manage."