RANDOM THOUGHTS

Communications With A Purpose

July 2008

Could You Live without Microsoft?

This is something I think about from time to time because I like the idea of open source software, but so far it's not been possible for me to move from Microsoft to open source. Linux and open source applications largely have failed to catch on because the people who would be most able to use them haven't started using them.

Linux can handle word processing, number processing, Web browsing, and e-mail. These are the most commonly used programs. If these applications are all you need, there's nothing to stop you from moving to Linux and OpenOffice.

I thought it might be interesting to see how well Linux and the open source community would serve my needs, so I'll list the applications I use most often and indicate whether there's an acceptable Linux alternative. To determine whether you could get along with Linux, you'll need to create your own matrix.

- THE BAT: This is my favorite e-mail program and it works only with Windows. I could probably get along without it by using Evolution. Score: 0
- FIREFOX: The Mozilla browser is, in my opinion, better than Microsoft's and Firefox works with Linux. Score: +1
- PIDGIN: Although I don't use AIM a lot, it does help me keep in touch with some people. I won't use AOL's AIM client and my preference is Pidgin, which is available for Linux. Score: +1
- DREAMWEAVER: My websites are designed around Dreamweaver's capabilities and I cannot bear to be without this application. Although there are open-source HTML editors, none does what Dreamweaver does. Score -1
- PHOTOSHOP: There's nothing on the Linux side that comes close to matching Photoshop's capabilities. The GIMP does many of the same functions, but not in a way that I can adopt it. Yet. Score -1
- INDESIGN: This is the only page layout program I use these days, although I still have a lot of affection for Ventura Publisher. In any case, both are Windows only. Linux has no acceptable equivalents. Score -1
- FILEZILLA: This is my preferred FTP application and fortunately it's available for Linux. Score +1
- TIMESLIPS: I use Timeslips for time billing and I've found nothing to compare on Linux. Score -1
- THUMBSPLUS: I use this every week to perform automated tasks for TechByter Worldwide. Nothing similar exists for Linux users. Score -1
- WORD: Word has a lot of features that I don't use. OpenOffice Writer also has features that I don't use. I use a word processor for processing words. Writer is more than adequate. Score +1
- EXCEL: As with Word, Excel has a lot of features that I don't use. I could probably get along with Calc, even though it doesn't support some of the add-ins I use. Score +1
- ACCESS: Access is Microsoft's database program. Most of what I do could be done in Calc, but the OpenOffice version of a front end for MySQL seems a little weak. Score 0
- POWERPOINT: OpenOffice has Presentation, but it doesn't have the features I've come to depend on in Powerpoint. Score -1
- ULTRAEDIT: This is a text editor without rival on the Windows side. Several open-source competitors exist, but I haven't found one that offers what UltraEdit does. Score -1
- CARBONITE: What I like most about Carbonite is that it makes backup so easy. Linux has lots of tools for backup, but nothing this easy. Score -1
- CORELDRAW: I've been wedded to CorelDraw since the 1980s and it's Windows only. Score -1
- ITUNES and WINAMP: Itunes is for Windows and Mac computers only. You might be able to run one or the other (or both) under WINE. My preference is for Winamp and this is mainly a Windows application. Score -1
- SNAGIT & WINZIP: These are two utilities I can't do without. Some screen capture applications exist for Linux and I could probably make do with them. File compression applications exist, too, although not as robust as WinZip. Score 0

So the bottom line is that Linux isn't quite yet ready for me, although it's close and every time I perform this test it seems to get closer.

Maybe it's close enough now for you. ß

Spam from Legitimate Companies?

Lately I've noticed a disturbing trend in spam. Or maybe I should say a "more disturbing trend". Some of the spams look like they've been sent by legitimate companies. Most of them say that I'm receiving the message because I registered with them or with a partner, but that lie is revealed immediately when I examine the address the message was sent to and determine that it's an address I would never use to register with any site. But are companies such as Sears climbing into bed with spammers or is something else going on?

I wasn't sure, so I visited the Sears website and filled out a contact form for the company's public relations department on March 26. On June 19, I had heard nothing, so I made a second request, shown at left.

A few days before my deadline for finishing this report, Sears Responded.

Christian Brathwaite wrote "Bill - based on our information, you opted in to receive email offers via a third party vendor we work with. Our information shows you signed up at elitesurveygroup.com on Feb. 29th. If you would like to opt out from receiving additional communications from any Sears Holdings retail formats, please let us know."

That's interesting. As I told Christian, "I've never heard of elitesurveygroup.com and what I saw on their website didn't give me much confidence. The site appears to be one of the kinds of sites I warn people about. It makes me sad to see a company with the reputation Sears has use this kind of "marketing". So to recap, to the best of my knowledge: 1) I've never heard of the vendor you work with. 2) I have never filled out one of their surveys. 3) The e-mail the message was sent to isn't one I would use for something like this. If you can provide any additional information, I will be willing to review it."

Actually, I was rather kinder than I should have been. The only e-mail address Christian Brathwaite had for me was my techbyter.com address and I am absolutely certain that I have never used that address on any site such as that operated by the Elite Survey Group. The spam I had complained about was sent to one of my "unlisted" addresses. I hadn't mentioned that address in my message to Sears, so Brathwaite assumed that the spam had come to the address he had and attempted to mollify me with a canned response that uses a date far enough in the past that I might have thought that he was telling the truth. Except for the fact that I would never use my TechByter address for anything but communications with readers, listeners, and correspondents in the tech industry.

So was Christian Brathwaite lying to me when he said that I had signed up on February 29? Some might say that he was, and I would be one of them.

Have I heard anything further? No.

A Sour Note from Eharmony

Another spam I received recently appeared to come from the on-line matchmaker EHarmony.

The sender was micmark.com, an organization that was listed as the 38th most prolific spammer on the date I received the message. (Source: URIBL)

Does EHarmony work with micmark.com or is this just a run-of-the-mill click-fraud operation? Micmark is registered to TopEdgeInteractive.com, which claims to be in Santa Barbara.

On March 26, I visited Eharmony's website and filled out a request form. Nobody responded. On June 19, I attempted to reach Eharmony's public relations department by phone, but never succeeded.

So, as with Sears, I can only conclude that spam is condoned as a marketing tool.

Trust Your Computer to a Spammer?

No question, tech support is a good thing, but a message offering support came from an address that raises suspicion: DYbdcebdcemhbZA@goodtraps.com. The random letters in the sender's "name" strongly suggest spam. And GOODTRAPS? Could they write "spam" in neon 60-feet tall? URIBL listed GoodTraps.com as the #24 most prolific spammer on the day the spam arrived. It's owned by TopVirtualInteractive.com, which is associated with "Money Muddle" and other active spammers.

One More Spam I Didn't Open

Subject: william.blinn's - We can hsip your medicatinos overnight FERE.
From: Levitar iVagra <wpolk@nist.gov>

It's probably not necessary to say that I'm not too likely to do business with a company that can't spell "ship", "medications", or even "free". It's also probably not necessary to point out that it's unlikely anyone is named "Levitar iVagra". And I'm sure you know that the National Institute of Standards and Technology (NIST) doesn't run a drugstore.

Oh, and then there's that little problem with the apostrophe in my name. Didn't need to mention that, either, did I?

Spam continues to plague us because people respond to spams. If we ever manage to develop, as a society, enough sophistication to recognize spams for what they are and to make spammers' efforts pointless, the spam will stop. Until then, your e-mail inbox and mine will continue to fill with this illiterate and illegitimate sewage. ß

CORNER on the market by A.J. Stinnett

"Allow employees to decide how to do their work, but require procedures that permit work to be done effectively and make work procedures flexible."