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inside:

MOTD

BY ROB KOLSTAD



USENIX & SAGE

The Advanced Computing Systems Association &
The System Administrators Guild

motd

by Rob Kolstad



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Nomenclature: How Hard Can It Be?

I am writing this column in the fervent hope that people will pay attention to the words that surround us. Our economic system, fabulous as it is (and I am its biggest fan), has regrettably promoted a sort of marketing-speak that has so obfuscated some communications that I sometimes find myself at a loss trying to figure out if anyone can understand certain messages being shared.

Consider this one from an employee of a financial company: "Without Microsoft, I couldn't do my job." This person evidently believes that everything from the spacebar to the network connection somehow falls under the auspices of Microsoft. This would include (but not be limited to): the really fast microprocessor (probably an Intel or AMD component - engineering that we can show the aliens when they arrive), a graphics card (100x faster than available five years ago), a monitor, an application that might not even belong to Microsoft, DRAM from overseas, power from the local utility company, etc. etc. Yet who gets the credit? The operating system company: "Where do you want to go today?" Wow.

The headline blares: "Linux Enables Successful Space Shuttle Mission." Yes, someone on the mission had a laptop running Linux. Was that *the* big key to the mission's success? I doubt it.

Or how about this printer claim: "Printer rated at 8ppm color, 12ppm black and white." A rational person could interpret this as, "Oh, I reckon I'll probably see 6-8 pages per minute when I print color output on this printer." Bzzzt. Wrong answer. What it means is: "We will given you a written guarantee that this printer will never, ever, ever exceed 8ppm color or 12ppm black and white no matter under what circumstances." Has any printer of this model ever printed 8 color pages in any minute? Probably not. But the limiting factor is not the page feeding mechanism!

"Fumblebum's color text editor allows me to edit twice as fast as my old editor." Where did we get this word "allow" in the context of computer software? Programs "enable" (and security programs "permit" - sometimes even "allow"). I fear that simple word usage like this makes people think that somehow software or computers or somesuch *grant them permission* to perform a task. Who is the master? Who is the slave?

This same sort of marketing jargon permeates our industry at all levels. One of my favorites is the "Designated Guru;" Bill Joy sometimes fills this niche at Sun Microsystems. You can read history books that discuss how "Bill rewrote the entire UNIX operating system from scratch." I respect Bill's technical ability as much as the next guy, but I don't reckon he wrote the OS from scratch.

Does the technological consuming public really need the kind of hyperbole, misdirection, and icon-worshipping that advertising would lead us to believe? Check out any trade magazine that prints in four colors. Look at the ads. Are these ads aimed at super-technical types? I think not. Read the articles. "Drimkel Corp credits its entire successful 3rd quarter to the Excel spreadsheet macro designed by Joe Glerky." I just don't think it helps. I usually try to provide some sort of prescription to address this problem. The only thing I can imagine is that we should all try to use the proper words when we discuss technology. We should try to have a slightly broader understanding than "Bill Gates has rewritten Windows to be the world's fastest Web Server." Maybe we could go for just one more level of detail.

I'm going to try; I hope you will, too.