



The mainstreaming of open systems technology is making it difficult for magazines that cover it to succeed.

The Internet proves to be an effective medium for IT executives to handle daily communications.

## As Technology Matures, Publications Wither

If historians should designate 1995 as the year open systems joined the computing mainstream, journalists may remember that coming of age for some painful moments, particularly the demises of three widely circulated and respected periodicals: *Open Systems Today*, *Advanced Systems* and the latest, *Open Computing*. All three began the year with at least a healthy readership. At year's end, only one survived in any form, *Advanced Systems* having become *SunWorld Online* on the World Wide Web.

What happened to them has little to do with demand for Unix and open systems-related information and much to do with the dynamics of the publishing business and the perceptions of IT vendors about where to spend their advertising dollars. In an ironic sense, it demonstrates how a venture can become the victim of its own success and ambition.

Although the exact circumstances differed with each of the defunct publications, there were strong common threads. In each case, the publisher had decided to move out of a Unix or product-specific niche into the broader but less clearly defined realm of open systems, covering topics such as client/server computing, Windows NT and the Internet. *Unix Today*, started by CMP Publications in 1985, became *Open Systems Today* in 1993. *Unix World*, a McGraw-Hill magazine that began in 1983, became *Open Computing*, also in 1993. *SunWorld*, a magazine started in 1988 and bought by International Data Group in 1989, became *Advanced Systems* in 1994. Publishers told themselves that the industry was changing and they would have to change with it. But once into the computing mainstream,

these publications found themselves subject to forces they couldn't control.

In the view of some observers, the clearest case of overreaching was *Open Computing*, which published its last issue in December. The monthly changed its focus along with its name, moving more technical articles and columns to an electronic-only version called *Unix World Online*. Another strategic move was to broaden circulation from a paid subscriber base of 80,000 to a controlled (mostly unpaid) base of 110,000. Having cut off its revenue stream from subscriptions and newsstand sales, *Open Computing* found itself competing for advertising dollars with *Computerworld*, *InformationWeek* and *Datamation*.

"It was a mistake they never recovered from," says Andrew Binstock, editor-in-chief of *Unix Review*, one of the few surviving publications in this field. "They expected that by broadening their franchise, they would be able to bring on board more advertisers. What happened is that they lost their identity."

For a while, the strategy looked like it would work, according to Michela O'Connor Abrams, publisher of *Open Computing*. During its first year as *Open Computing*, ending in late 1994, the magazine had its best year ever for revenue. "We had every reason to believe it would be smashingly successful," Abrams says.

## Shifting Perceptions

In 1995, the environment changed. Vendors began to see open systems not as a distinct segment of readers, as they had with Unix, but as a concept that had become accepted and almost totally absorbed by the general computing industry. "It seems to me that, from the advertiser's perspective, it wasn't worth it to

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## IT Executives Don't Work Without Net

Now that a strong breeze of skepticism has ruffled the banners of Internet mania, it may be informative to scale back the rhetoric and look for humbler signs of value. For example, how deeply has Internet use penetrated into the executive suite, which is not known as a bastion of technology innovation? Why not start with top management of some IT companies?

I asked six CEOs or senior vice presidents—via e-mail, of course—to what extent they use the Internet (including the World Wide Web) to conduct daily business. Even when we take into account the obvious vested interest in advocating this technology, their responses show some plain ways of putting the Net to practical purposes. (I also sat down with my boss, Richard Jaross, in the UniForum offices. No sense in pushing this e-mail thing beyond reason, is there?)

Perhaps the first point to make is that, by taking this avenue of communications, I got through to the executives. They were willing to respond when they found time; I probably would have been out of luck trying to set up phone interviews. This availability, as several of them noted, extends to others. Bob Frankenberg, Novell CEO, said, "The entire executive staff is directly accessible to Novell customers, Novell partners, and every Novell employee." Even if the Net did nothing more than circumvent corporate bureaucracy, it would be valuable.

## Facing the Mail

This does not imply that merely sending e-mail to a CEO guarantees a response. (It took me up to four tries to get results, and I get paid to be persistent.) Sheer volume necessitates setting a policy. Scott McNealy, CEO of Sun Microsystems, said he gets from 125 to 200 e-mails a day, most of them from within his company.

Alok Mohan, CEO of the Santa Cruz

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buy into that audience versus the audience that was reading *Computerworld*, for them it was the same audience," says Michael Goulde, an *Open Computing* columnist and executive editor of the Patricia Seybold Group in Boston.

Abrams admits, "To maintain that an advertiser could not reach that information space anywhere else was the problem. I'm not sure we anticipated that it would be this difficult." In addition, the economics of publishing were exacerbated by a general flattening of total advertising dollars, a postage rate increase in February, and a 60 percent increase in paper costs last spring. "If you're an \$80 million operation like *Computerworld*, you can take a down time," Abrams says. "You can't when you're a \$15 million publication."

As open systems is no longer an issue, advertisers are no longer attracted by it, says Rikki Kirzner, *Open Computing's* technology editor. "The media buyer wants to be where it's hot, and open systems isn't hot anymore," she says. "It's time now to go on with what's hot, which is primarily networking and the Internet."

Other observers are more caustic. "It's bad karma," says Maureen O'Gara, editor of the industry newsletter *Unigram X*. "The public doesn't identify with something as wishy-washy as open systems."

O'Gara and others say *Open Computing* abandoned its readership. "They adopted a mantra that nobody else actually related to, and so people would feel lost," Binstock says. "It was difficult to look at three or four issues in a row and figure out whom these folks were appealing to."

David Smith, research director for Gartner Group in Stamford, CT, says, "The publication wasn't what it used to be. It didn't have the depth or as much interesting material as in the past."

Abrams disputes this kind of assessment. The magazine had spent a month talking to readers in focus groups before the name change and found that readers were interested primarily in reading about multivendor, multiplatform environments, not about Unix itself, she says, adding that after the change, "Editorial got an incredible amount of mail and kudos from the reader base."

**Earlier Casualties**

In the case of *Open Systems Today*, the advertising dynamic worked in much the same way, to the detriment of the biweek-

ly's profitability, although its editorial content was always respected. CMP decided to fold the tabloid *OST* into its glossy computer weekly, *InformationWeek*. Although the change has improved *InformationWeek*, many still miss *OST*. "I thought *OST* was the best of them," Smith says. "I was really sad when that one closed."

*SunWorld*, in becoming *Advanced Systems*, had great hopes, says former publisher Michael McCarthy, now president and publisher of *SunWorld Online*, an IDG publication provided on the Web via servers owned by Sun Microsystems. "We saw Unix growing into being more than just an operating system and a series of engineering platforms and taking a more important position in the enterprise," McCarthy says.

Although the magazine did get additional advertisers, it didn't get enough of them. One problem was that what McCarthy calls "peripheral advertisers"—traditional computer vendors moving into the open systems arena—wanted to focus their message on their traditional customers, not on a readership they saw as Unix-centric. *Advanced Systems* folded last May, and *SunWorld Online* appeared on the Web in July.

Is this so-called maturation of open systems a time to rejoice or a time to cry? Perhaps, like most graduations, it's a little of both. "Like other things, technologies are absorbed and join the mainstream. It seems like open systems is being absorbed, and in a way that's a reason to celebrate," says Norton Greenfeld, president of Implements, Inc., a consulting firm in Wayland, MA.

**Learning from Experience**

"There is an emotional issue here," says Richard Jaross, executive director of UniForum. "We like to see publications in our industry go forward, and when they don't you lose a sense of community. When Unix was new, there was that sense of a community of people helping each other solve problems. But I think this is a sign of success. The companies selling open systems solutions are growing like gangbusters, so the industry is very healthy and has become mainstream."

No doubt you've noticed that the magazine in which you're reading this article has changed its own name, as of this very issue. UniForum feels confident that *UniForum's IT Solutions* can avoid the pitfalls

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Operation, receives "well over a hundred messages a day." If you want to get his attention, you had better have a precise, compelling phrase on your Subject line, he said; this goes for his management team as much as anyone else. Most of Mohan's mail filters down to managers according to the message's content.

Clearly, e-mail is an additional source of information vying for the executive's time, but IT leaders at least take it seriously—unlike, perhaps, phone calls, which seem to disappear into a black hole when the voice mail system picks up. Of the daily 75 to 100 messages he receives, Frankenberg estimated that "roughly 25 percent of these traverse the Net from outside Novell. Dealing with the volume is difficult. My mail is screened for junk mail, but I read and reply to all messages that arrive in my mailbox. I do a lot of mail from home and on planes."

Despite the potential for overload, e-mail streamlines many tasks that other methods complicate. "I don't think I could operate without e-mail," said Jaross. "It allows you to communicate as if thousands of people worked with you." He pointed out that one e-mail sent to the alias for the UniForum board of directors, who are dispersed across the United States and Canada, takes the place of nine faxes or phone calls.

**Making a Difference**

In the context of e-mail, the Internet basically supports personal and group productivity—not enough to justify all the excitement. But the executives polled asserted that using it contributes to their constant search for business advantage.

Some IT companies use the Internet as the basis of in-house communications or to supplement their private networks. "I am convinced that the Internet has made my organization more competitive," said Wim Roelandts, formerly senior vice president of Hewlett-Packard and now CEO of Xilinx. "We use it heavily to distribute information to people in the organization (e.g., all our sales literature is stored on Internet servers,

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that trapped its former competitors. For one thing, the dynamic of this nonprofit industry association differs from that of large commercial publishers.

More importantly, according to Jaross, the editorial focus of the magazine will stay

the Unix-centric course that has made it successful over the last two years. "We believe that open systems, including Unix, TCP/IP, the Internet and other technologies that have grown up together, is the best solution for enterprise computing, and we will continue to say so," he says. "Based

on that conviction, we are dedicated to helping our readers meet the challenges they face in today's complex IT architectures. There is clearly a need for practical articles that they can turn to for sound advice. We won't lose our direction." **IT**

—Don Dugdale

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and people can access it via browsers). The ability to access information quickly and efficiently and to communicate with people around the world sure makes a difference."

"The Internet is transforming our company in terms of how we conduct business inside the company," said Ed McCracken, Silicon Graphics CEO. "It is becoming the preferred information dissemination and communication medium for the vast majority of employees. It allows them to easily gain access to whatever info they need to do their jobs and provides the context needed for fast decision-making." He listed a variety of other areas, including personnel matters, training and software distribution, that SGI handles over the network.

Alok Mohan stressed the global access capability of the Net. "I use the Internet to conduct daily business, especially when I am away from the office, but also when I am in the office and communicating with my senior management team around the globe. I also use it to distribute corporate messages to all our employees. I can be sure that they all have the opportunity to be informed at the same time, no matter where they are."

Scott McNealy emphasized Sun's corporate network, which he called "little I" intranet communication. The Internet is great for maintaining contact with friends, but the intranet is more important for my own day-to-day activities," he said. "I communicate with Sun employees via WSUN radio, a monthly online audio e-mail, or via compressed video messages on subjects like quarterly financials."

For UniForum, a nonprofit trade association with a small staff, the Internet serves as a leveler of cost considerations. "We've used it for research, and we can trace a large number of enrollments in our seminars, our training sessions and our main event—the UniForum Conference—to Web postings and newsgroups," Jaross said. "The Net also keeps us in touch with our members." As an example, he cited the "Member Views" column of our magazine (see page 18 in this issue). Magazine staff sends out a question (often related to subjects covered in feature articles) by e-mail and prints members' responses, adding to the range of opinion on pressing issues that we're able to present to our readers.

### CEOs Never Sleep

Like many people who work for them, top executives stay on the job outside the office. Obviously, the Internet enables the virtual office, and those polled here have made sure their home computing systems can support their needs. McCracken, McNealy, Roelandts and Jaross have ISDN lines into their homes. Frankenberg has, in addition to a 486 desktop PC, a dedicated NetWare server, a high-speed hub/router and a frame

relay connection. Mohan has a more modest system, relying on a Windows PC with a fast modem and the Netscape Web browser.

As well as catching up on work left over from the day, the executives use the Net at home to educate themselves. Frankenberg and McCracken have their own home pages linked to those of their companies. McCracken said he surfs the Web often, with his main activities being "news gathering and information services."

In addition to keeping up with IT-related matters, Roelandts searches Web sites for information about art and history, two of his hobbies. McNealy uses the Net to check in with friends whom he hasn't time to contact otherwise.

### More to Come

Not surprisingly, these IT company leaders waxed eloquent about the potential of the Internet to extend their competitive advantage. Most highly touted for emergence in the near term was video conferencing. "We will have full desktop video conferencing over the intranet within two years," McNealy asserted.

"When live video conferencing comes to the Internet, it may even eliminate much of the time I have to spend traveling on airplanes," Mohan suggested. "Our employees will have live interactions with video, voice and multiple types of data, including 3-D graphics," McCracken promised. "This more robust feature set will allow true collaborative work."

Frankenberg went so far as to say, "We see a fully networked economy in the future. We will transact substantial business with our partners and distribute a significant portion of our product offering over the Net."

Again, it makes sense that CEOs of IT firms recognize the value of the Internet in running their companies. But not everyone in the industry has jumped ahead with this strategy yet. At the time I conducted the poll, Klaus Besier, CEO of software vendor SAP America, was attending the board meeting of the German parent company SAP AG. He said, "One of the topics of discussion is how SAP can better exploit the capabilities of the Internet from a business perspective." He was in the process of setting up Web access from his home as well as the office.

None of the executives expected Internet use to do away with the personal touch that goes a long way toward making a leader effective. But some noted that using the Net to automate tasks, such as those mentioned above, leaves more time for them to focus on matters where their personal intervention can make a difference for the enterprise. **IT**

—Jeffrey Bartlett