

## Can Open Systems Sell Products?



**T**oday's competitive IT market exacts terminal punishment from those who purchase technology independent of identifiable, certifiable payback. IT that doesn't offer the most cost-effective solution to a real business problem wastes resources that are better applied elsewhere. Yet, although it's a business fact, recognized by most, that technology is a tool and not a goal in itself, many buyers seem to disregard this at every decision point.

Open systems purport to facilitate access to resources and applications across a range of systems and networks. Several times a year at various industry venues, several thousand individuals gather to promote visions and versions, mergers and convergence in support of advanced products that often appear to be of more interest to the vendor participants than the ultimate product consumers. But even these participants are growing somewhat weary and jaded as the promise of reality-based, de facto-standardized mechanisms continues to fall victim to bureaucratic sclerosis and proprietary paranoia.

Of course, vendors must know how to position and rank their products vis-a-vis the competition. They need to be sensitive to technology trends, stepwise improvements in tools and the like. These tactics stand as key determinants in the ability to effectively develop, position, promote and sell against competitive products. But vendors must be cooperative as well as competitive to survive. Integration, data exchange, common APIs: Every product introduction comes loaded with verbiage describing the benefits of the standardized,

level playing field for access to data.

Here we come upon the paradox of open systems: People want it, but they have trouble actually buying it. Before they will buy, consumers must believe their purchase will deliver greater benefit to their business than any of the alternatives. Unless they have an unlimited budget and/or a death wish, they make purchases on the basis of the ability to alleviate pain caused by business problems. Unix, Windows 95, NT, MPE or MVS—consumers will choose on the basis of which conveys the most applications to actively address their concerns.

### Lure of the Proprietary

Open systems have been promoted as fundamental nostrums in that cure. But set against the only real figures that count—pure volume of solutions—the environment of choice often is a proprietary environment—one that is standard only in the sense that it enjoys widespread distribution and packaging, while design, development, control and definition of the environment rest in the hands of one, and only one, vendor.

There is a reason why the corporate desktop belongs to Windows, despite its shortcomings and missing “open systems” pedigree. It is the ubiquitous, unambiguous delivery mechanism for the solutions that address and alleviate customer pain today. This is not to argue that real benefit has not accrued (and continues to accrue) from the efforts at defining, designing and implementing standards-based solution environments. The evolution of standards has made a fundamental contribution to IT and its ability to create and deliver effective solutions. Further, the space for its contribution is by no means exhausted, with much work still remaining. The message of open systems benefits has taken, but in and of itself a generic open systems tag line is not compelling enough to justify a purchase.

The vendor's task remains the same as ever. Deliver the benefit. Show the con-

sumer solutions that meet immediate business needs. The vast majority of the market has little interest in the arcane world of dueling technologies, with which vendors are intimately familiar and which they discuss in excruciating detail. The solutions purchaser is perfectly willing for vendors to conduct their battles in private, as long as they provide solutions that live up to their promise and perform as advertised.

Few businesses ache from an absence of open systems; they hurt from the costs of unanticipated congestion, avoidable failure and the unreliable delivery of incompatible services, whether it is an incomplete phone call or a failed accounting application. Cooperative definition and delivery of truly compatible, standards-based environments and support services will win the consumer competition only if they answer these demands.

Does this situation signify the demise of open systems? Has the investment and effort been futile? Is the chorus of proprietary solution diehards on the verge of vindication?

Certainly not. It does mean that proponents of open systems must make a hard and highly critical self-evaluation. They must eliminate the politically correct, never-ending discussion that has delayed delivery or compromised efforts aimed at providing viable, consistent open systems platforms. Even if this is realized only through the cooperative efforts of a limited number of vendors, open systems proponents must focus their effort on delivery of a standard platform environment.

TCP/IP, SNMP, early Unix: All were the result of bold assertion and the aggressive presentation of effective responses to real problems. They met specific customer needs. Today's customers are not enthralled by technology and its minutiae. For them, availability takes precedence. A decisive move by open systems suppliers can still foster the growth of a true solutions industry to the benefit of the consumer and the fast-footed vendors who, cooperatively, provide it. **IT**

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