

When Everything Is Called Unix



When the fans of UNIX '95 are counted, please count me out.

UNIX '95 is the name X/Open utilizes to certify those operating systems that are in compliance with a test suite, including the Spec 1170 application programming interface (API) specification. Any operating system that passes the appropriate tests is certified as being UNIX '95-compliant. Thereafter, it can be described as being Unix.

Let me say that I do favor standardization. I believe that Unix can survive only through increasing the commonality of the environment. I am reminded of the comment by Benjamin Franklin on the signing of the Declaration of Independence, "We must all hang together, else we shall all hang separately." The Unix vendors must work jointly to produce a common environment for developers and users. Lacking this, the Unix vendors will be progressively sliced and diced by Microsoft.

The problem I have with UNIX '95 is the name. [Editor's Note: According to X/Open, UNIX '95 now is known as the Single UNIX Specification.]

The Unix marketplace is moving toward being more and more commoditized. Think for a moment about what a fully commoditized marketplace means. Think about bleach. Fundamentally all bleaches are identical. They may add a bit of perfume, but fundamentally all bleaches are the same. If you got bleach in an unmarked bottle, it is unlikely that you could identify the manufacturer. So

how do bleach manufacturers compete?

Brand-name recognition is the quickest answer. Clorox spends millions of dollars to make sure that consumers recognize the brand name of its product and have favorable associations with it. The use and abuse of a brand name is an issue to which companies in commoditized marketplaces pay lots of attention.

As the Unix marketplace commoditizes, brand names will be the most valuable resources the vendors own. They will cherish and protect the name the market recognizes for their products, much the way Clorox does. Brand awareness will be a key metric of the success of an operating system.

I am not convinced that anyone in the state of Iowa, for example, recognizes the names HP-UX, Solaris or AIX. Well, maybe a few do, but I know that a lot more people in Iowa recognize the name Unix. They may not know all of the latest information on what is in Unix, but they recognize the trademark.

Unix is being sold into broader audiences. It has moved out of the technical niche to be a product that is used in solutions to diverse problems in all sorts of marketplaces. As this continues to happen, Unix will be sold to people who do not have a technical, or even a computer, background. Brand awareness will play a definite role in these sales.

Muddying the Waters

Sometime in the next few years, IBM is going to be an all-Unix company. Not only will AIX pass the UNIX '95 certification suite, but MVS, OS/400 and OS/2 probably will, too. Digital Unix will not be the only Unix at Digital, because OpenVMS will also be UNIX '95-compliant. I expect at some point a third party will offer a product that can be combined with Windows NT to allow NT to pass the UNIX '95 certification suite. At that point even Microsoft will be selling a Unix product. Again, any product that passes the UNIX '95 certification may use the

UNIX trademark and call itself Unix.

So what will the name Unix mean in the future? Less than it has in the past. Applying the term more broadly means applying it less specifically. If all operating systems are Unix, then the term means less for the ones that come from the traditional AT&T heritage. At a time when Unix vendors will be selling into broader audiences, the UNIX trademark will be used by all operating system vendors. In other words, the one broadly recognized trademark will have been given to all comers.

I can imagine, five years down the road, a manager of information services talking to his new Sun sales rep. "Sure, we buy Unix. I have MVS Unix on my mainframe, VMS Unix on my departmental system and Microsoft Unix on my desktops. Now tell me again why I want to buy this Solaris product. I have more Unix than I can handle already." The Sun rep will be left to explain that he is selling *real* Unix, not those imitations. Somehow I don't think this is an improvement for the Unix industry.

By the way, I do not blame X/Open for this decision. When X/Open received the trademark, it came with the proviso of how the UNIX trademark would evolve into the UNIX '95 certification process. It appears that the decision was made jointly by the Unix vendors and with the approval of Novell.

Once again, let me state that I do not object to the unification of Unix; quite the contrary. I think it is essential for the continuing welfare of the marketplace. I just wish they had called it something else, like XPG5 or Posix '95—anything other than UNIX '95! **TT**

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Did something in this column press one of your hot buttons? Then let us hear what you think by sending a response to pubs@uniforum.org. We'll consider it for publication in "Letters to the Editor."

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