

THE WAKE OF WAVE

Dear Linux Magazine Reader,

A big company doesn't just grow like a kid – it evolves, kind of like a star. And big monopoly companies have their own phases of evolution. The culture of the modern corporate world favors growth, and a company with monopoly-like power can grow quite explosively in a very short time. Who's going to stop them while they swallow up whole markets and industries?

Most market-conquering companies are well run, with a corporate culture that resists complacency and insists on individual achievement, and yet, the more they grow, the more they start to resemble big government bureaucracies – at least internally. No casual observer can really see it because, unlike a government bureaucracy, a big company has a sleek and well-tuned PR engine painting the picture of a nimble, dancing titan making a success of everything it touches. The financial pubs, which are inevitably a bigger factor in forming public opinion than the high-tech pubs, tend to base their opinions on balance sheets, stock prices, and well-orchestrated “insider tips” with little concern for the real machinery.

But something starts to happen when a company gets really big. It expends so much bandwidth talking to itself that the feedback loop with the public gets distorted. I'm sure the leaders of Google go to work every day saying they are not going to end up like Microsoft – just as the Microsoft leaders went to work every day saying they weren't going to end up like IBM, but things happen. Several years ago, I remember hitting a stone wall of indifference when I was trying to get tech support from Microsoft – even while I was writing a book for a major publisher on one of their critical new technologies. They were simply too big and too busy to care, and the marketing department (which was all about talking to the press) was too far across the campus – and too far away on the organizational chart – from the engineering department, which had the answers I needed. The result of this configuration is a huge overload of marketing information and a huge shortage of technical information, which leads to a gigantic, grandiose shower of launch hype in the magazines that specialize in reprinting tech tidbits and press releases and a severe lack of follow-up in the technical pubs (in print and online) that actually show how to implement these technologies in a practical way.

You probably won't read this until March or April, but I'm writing it in early January, an ideal time for reflecting on the events of 2010. One of the biggest train wrecks of the past year was the fizzling of Google's Wave project, an ambitious amalgam of communication, collaboration, and social networking that was supposed to change the Internet but ended up closing after only a few months because not enough people could figure

out how to use it or why they needed it. I'm sure Google has already justified for itself why the project failed – Too complex? Too far ahead of its time? – and because they still made big profits in 2010, the failure of Wave is no more than a blip on the monitor. But speaking as one who is perennially standing on the beach, I can tell you that Wave would have landed with more of a splash if the company that launched it had taken the time and energy to nurture this new technology in the public mind, rather than just throwing it out there with the assumption that it was important just because Google did it.

Wave was only one small-time web tool – and perhaps it wasn't destined to change the world in the first place – but Android is much more important to the company's fortunes. Google has secured a large market share in a big hurry with the Android mobile OS, but suddenly the competition is closer, with MeeGo on the horizon, Apple still innovating, Microsoft coming back for another round, and app stores appearing on every virtual street corner. It is going to be more important than ever for Google to invest in real, effective, technical communication in 2011 if they want to keep their lead in the emerging smartphone industry.

Joe

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