

The New AOL Floppy

Some clever marketing people have started issuing USB drives loaded with their promotional information in lieu of the usual pamphlets and swag. *By Jon "maddog" Hall*

Some of you might remember "floppy disks." When I started using them, they held an "amazing" 92KB of data, eventually working their way to relatively large capacities. However, the disk most people remember is the 3.5-inch floppy that held 1.44MB. Conversely, floppies used to cost a couple of dollars each when they first came out, but over time, they decreased in price as manufacturing and competition drove prices down.

Some of you might also remember that America Online (AOL) used these 3.5-inch floppies to advertise their services. A floppy would arrive in the mail with some software that would advertise AOL and allow you to connect to their service.

By the time all of this happened I was using GNU/Linux. Of course, the software that came on the floppy disk did not work on my Linux system, so I would simply write over the floppy and use it as a boot disk or for transferring small files. After all, it only took about 150 of these disks to hold the Slackware distribution of the day. After a while, AOL got a little wiser and started putting their software onto CD-ROMs. Now that they couldn't use them for backups or distributions, many people used them as drink coasters or made nice mobiles that reflected rainbow colors in the sunlight.

Some Linux people took the CD-ROM advertising step a bit further and created some CD-ROMs the size of a business card that had useful programs (as well as advertising data) on them, and they simply printed their contact information on the top of the "cards." Linuxcare, an early support company, was famous for their wallet-sized "recovery CD." As distributions became larger and networks faster and more prevalent, the need for something in your pocket to "recover" your system dropped a bit; plus, the advent of the CD-R allowed people to tailor their own recovery systems easily, so the "wallet card" dropped in popularity.

At a recent conference, ICANN distributed a USB thumb drive containing some documents and presentations to every attendee. This type of thing has happened before, but usually the thumb drives

were very small – perhaps 64MB of data; however, this drive had 4GB of storage marked on the outside of the drive. Intrigued, I put the drive into my system. ICANN had put only 600MB of data on this 4GB drive, and (more interesting) the drive was only showing 2GB of total capacity. I carefully pulled off the data, repartitioned the drive to 4GB, then installed Linux on it with a 2GB persistent filesystem. Then, I put the ICANN data back on and offered this "enhanced" USB image to some of my fellow attendees.

When I got home, I started looking at the price of USB drives in quantity. Low-end USB flash drives (the 64MB size) can get down to US\$ 3 each in quantities of 100. For the purposes of holding both a system and persistent data, I would want to see a minimum of 4GB, which in quantities of 100 cost US\$ 6.27 each; an 8GB drive would cost US\$ 8.32 in the same quantities. When you boost the quantity to 1,000, the prices are US\$ 5.18 and US\$ 7.23 for 4 and 8GB, respectively. This includes the logo and URL of your organization printed on the outside of the drive.

This might still sound like a lot of money for a "give-away" at an event, but the alternatives are not very cheap either. Printed materials are expensive and often go directly from your briefcase (where you stored them for the event) to the trash can (where the attendee deposited them). A color glossy pamphlet can easily cost US\$ 2 or US\$ 3 to print, and when the material needs to be updated, the pamphlet becomes useless. A thumb drive, however, can be reloaded to update information, or the data could even be updated over the Internet.

With one of these USB devices, the person who receives it might put it into their computer and access any multimedia data or boot the device to the Live Linux system to look at the data (which could be displayed through an auto-run scenario). Afterward, the person can copy the data to their own system, leave it on the thumb drive, or delete it, but they will still have your logo and URL on the outside of the thumb drive, because it is a fairly valuable item. Given that GNU/Linux is freely available, using USB devices as a promotional item is an attractive option. ■■■■

