TWO WEEK COOL

Dear Linux Magazine Reader,

Joe Casad, Editor in Chief

This month, I really wanted to write something about the recent iPhone controversy. My local paper ran an article on the problems Apple has been having with their customers, and the article contained one immortal quote from an ebullient Macophile who summed up so much of the Apple customer experience. Despite the company's erratic pricing schemes and strong-arm tactics with software vendors, this apple still had not fallen far from the tree. When asked if it bothered him to see the iPhone price drop by $200 after he purchased one at the initial price, he said no, the extra cost was well worth it because he had "a cool factor going for two solid weeks."

This "cool factor" intrigued me. Of course, the willingness to spend money to look cool is not unique or significant. The remarkable thing about the Apple audience is that they are so proud of it. Usually, conspicuous consumers who fork over big bucks for wine, sports cars, or Abercrombie pullover sweaters are careful to justify their purchases in terms of quality. I will admit that Apple makes high quality hardware. In this case, though, the quality wasn't really the issue, since the customer could have purchased an identical device two weeks later for a much lower price. Either way, this fellow (who didn't look especially young or naive) appeared utterly unconcerned with the formality of masking or repositioning his quest for coolness. If I were one to agree with the description of Steve Jobs as a genius, I would say that his true genius is in passing off this mix of hero worship and consumerism as a badge of technical merit.

I can imagine the discussions that took place in the Cupertino headquarters prior to the iPhone launch:

"How much do you think we can get for one of these?"

"Maybe $400."

"OK, lets price it at $600 for a couple weeks to shake down the people who worship us, then we'll drop it to $400 for everyone else."

Of course, this all just boils down to economics – albeit weird economics. What I really wanted to write about, and what is potentially much more significant to the open source community, is the tactics Apple has been using to keep independent software developers from writing programs for the iPhone. Others have written about this subject also. In fact, there has been such an outcry about these cat and mouse games – including a security upgrade that wiped out many add-on tools – that Apple has apparently changed course, announcing that an SDK for independent developers will be ready by February. According to Jobs, "We are excited about creating a vibrant third-party development community around the iPhone and enabling hundreds of new applications for our users."

So the temporary answer is – pressure works. Apple is just as much about making money as any other business, but because their business model depends upon their "cool factor," if some action is decidedly revealed as "uncool" in the tide of public opinion, they simply can't afford to be there.

The best thing for everybody would be if Apple would continue to make high quality computer hardware and electronic devices without trying to bewitch everyone into adopting their services, software, and exclusive licensing deals. This will never happen, of course, as long as Apple customers continue to download a prepackaged definition of "cool" from the company's marketing department. But if all those people who stood in line for $600 iPhones would find the independence to channel their emotions a bit, we could all be biting from a brand new Apple.

Joe