THE VISION THING...

Bad Will

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Back when I still lived in California, *Infoworld* columnist Brett Glass gave me a button depicting a rattlesnake coming out of a hole in a stylized rainbow apple. The caption read, "Keep your *@&%^& lawyers off my computer!" I don't remember which of Apple's tantrums this was about. It might have been their suit against Microsoft, or it might have been their suit against Digital Research. It might have been something else entirely. I believe the button was made by a group of Silicon Valley programmers to which Brett belonged; it was too crudely done to have been propaganda from a corporation. But the fact that individuals felt strongly enough to produce a button indicates that by then, Apple's biggest product was not the Mac but enemies. For every Mac evangelist I've met, I've met someone else who thinks of Apple only with a snarl.

The point here isn't to debate the merits of any of Apple's lawsuits. That's been done to death elsewhere. The point here is to think a little harder about the role of "bad will" in the computer industry. An ancient shopkeeper's maxim goes something like this: "One angry man can do damage that a hundred friends cannot put right." A satisfied customer says "thanks" and goes home. An angry customer will slander you mercilessly for years.

Over on the other side of the continent, Lotus Development sits in a red brick fortress, pinning all its future hopes on Lotus Notes. Notes is a peculiar thing. It's not a bad product in many ways, although its UI is from hunger. Corporate managers love it. But hell hath no fire like a programmer expressing his opinion of Notes. Notes may be no prize. But is it as bad as that? An outsider would be puzzled, until learning that to many or even most programmers, Lotus is The Evil Empire, almost entirely for their silly and unsuccessful suit against Borland over, of all things, a menu structure. Among programmers, Borland is probably the most-loved company of all time (and yes, Microsoft is right behind them) with Lotus coming in dead last.

Does this hurt Lotus? Consider this: Most good managers consult heavily with their technical staff before adopting any major software tool. Imagine this simple interchange: An IS director goes down to the Bat Cave and gathers the best young wizards for a simple question: "What do you think about this Lotus Notes thing?" The wizards laugh, roll their eyes, and say, "Sheesh, Pat, brain-dead junk, froze solid in 1988. It'll blow your training budget through the roof, and the vendor doesn't care what customers think. Give us an hour; we'll recommend 15 better packages." And they will. Multiply this by hundreds or thousands all across America, and you can see what Notes is up against. Market share comes about as a multitude of individual decisions in favor of or against your product or your company. One angry crank can turn dozens or hundreds of those decisions against you—and if persuasive, can recruit even more cranks to the cause. Worse, you can't fight them. You can't even *find* them.

Think for a moment of the most notorious industry litigants of the recent past. Apple. Lotus. Ashton-Tate. SEA. Which of these is setting the industry on fire? None. Apple is struggling horribly. Lotus is in the belly of the IBM whale, slowly being digested. Ashton-Tate is gone. SEA (which sued Phil Katz over a *command-line* user interface on a compression package) is not only gone but forgotten.

Does this suggest anything? You bet: Bad will can be hazardous to your continued existence. Think hard before you let your roaring testosterone turn the lawyers loose on a competitor—especially a popular competitor. Be nice; learn to lose the little ones, and pay attention to your public image at all levels. Once you earn the hatred of any large and influential segment of the industry, nothing can ever put things right. Bad will is deadly—and permanent. ▾

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