Free Advertising for a Good Idea

Don MacVittie, 2010-10-06

NOTE: To my knowledge, F5 Networks does not do business with Deep Storage. This article is purely personal opinion and should not be construed as F5's stance on… Well… Anything. In fact, there's a chance I'm getting called "up on the carpet" (as we used to say in the military) right now for this blog. Wish me luck.

If you've read my blog for the last few years, you know that I've bemoaned the death of print publishing in high tech simply because some of the publications were the last bastion of truly unbiased evaluation of gear. Everyone else was receiving cash directly from vendors to talk about those vendors. Many analyst firms were taking money from both vendor and enterprise, testing firms were evaluating based upon vendor needs, not the needs of the enterprise… The list goes on. To be certain, not all publications were clean, but some – like the Network Computing of old – were. They were proud of the line between sales (to vendors) and editorial (for enterprises), and everyone up and down the chain grew very nervous when those lines were approached by anyone internal or external. It was the "trust factor" that made Network Computing special, and that type of independent testing drew to a close with the end of print publications.

Online changed a lot, and one of the things it changed was the advertising model. No matter how low prices went online, they were not at the bottom, because tomorrow someone with a passion and a webserver (or an account at a hosting company) could bring up a website and charge less. And they did. By the thousands. The price that multi-million dollar companies were willing to pay for an advertisement got so ridiculously low that the model that included dedicated staff and enterprise grade testing just became unviable. And with that model went a tool that IT staff could use to make intelligent decisions in times of massive change.

Many (almost all of them vendor representatives) have argued that since advertising dollars came from vendors, these magazines were biased. From an insider I can tell you that "yes, some were", but "no, not all were". I asked once how much IBM paid NWC for an impressive advertisement, and I was told I didn't need to know, my job was to give readers what they needed – unbiased evaluations. This is a far cry from "The vendor is paying for this test, here are the parameters they want us to use" that you find lots of places doing today.

But one of the people who used to write for me when I was the Storage and Servers Editor at Network Computing is trying to move the pendulum back toward center, and I feel the need to endorse him. Howard Marks, long-time industry veteran has embarked on a project called Deep Storage that aims to merge the objectivity of the NWC model with the realities of today. While he takes money from vendors to perform tests, he has a set of ground rules that he requires these vendors agree to. Since he can't sell advertising without a publication, and online pubs still get a fraction of a cent per click, this model is probably the best we're going to see for a while, and I'm glad someone is going there.

Howard's most recent work (as in more than a decade of recent) has been in storage, and he's got quite a handle on the storage marketplace. It seems from perusing his website that the biggest names in storage are glad he's going here too. Here's wishing him luck. It's a hard sell to say "I'm taking your money, but you might lose you know…" Marketing departments don't like that kind of policy much.

Interestingly, as happens often in times of change, Howard is one of three different people I know that offer three different services that all kind of fill the gap left by magazines like NWC. Each of them offers a service, but which services, how they're delivered, and what the value proposition is for each of them is different. Interesting times. The others may appeal more from the short-term value delivered, but I'm curious to see if you, the enterprise user, make DeepStorage.net more valuable simply by your desire for technical crunchy bits and your trust of someone who's been doing geek long enough to remember how to make Win31 play nice with NetWare.

If you've read Lori's For Thirty Pieces of Silver My Product Can Beat Your Product post, I believe that Howard will do his best to provide his customers with the answers to those 10 questions, and today, that's a fair bit better than most of his contemporaries can do. Except for maybe the "how much did it cost" part. That's not nearly as important as who paid for it, and might be considered competitive information that the testing firm does not want released. I know I wouldn't, and that really doesn't indicate competitive versus comparative.

Of course, I'm only one person, and I'm not in any kind of relationship with the firm. If you've done business with DeepStorage.Net or are a competitor of someone who did, leave a comment, let us know if they're living up to their lofty goals, for in the end, actions speak louder than words. Beware of sour grapes though… If you leave a comment, make certain it is warranted and not a reaction to a bad report. There is only one winner in a comparative review remember.

Though talking to Howard about Deep Storage, he has not yet pulled off a comparative review. Thus far he's doing suitability-to-task type work, because of the issues around comparatives. But he's still hoping, sending out invitations to one soon. Here's hoping he pulls it off with élan, and even those who do not "win" find some value in his review, for then the model is viable and we're all better served.