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Silicon Valley Product Management Association
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NEWS

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June 2007 Event with John Roberts, SugarCRM

The Project-Powered Enterprise
Building a Great Product and Business with Commercial Open Source
By Vithi Singh

John Roberts, CEO, SugarCRM, addressed SVPMA members on June 6th to speak about building a project and business using commercial open source enterprise software. In the context of founding a company that is the world's leading provider of open source application software, John spoke about business model evolution, collecting requirements and software design, building of communities and the benefits of commercial open source software.

Touching upon the evolution of changes in technology, John noted the software industry had progressed from a client server model in 1999, to web based application and hosted software leading to improved user adoption in 2002 to current trend of open source software. He questioned the efficiency, profitability and customer focus resulting from proprietary model citing the example of Salesforce.com that spent $83,925,000 on sales and marketing expenses to acquire 60,000 new subscribers who will pay approximately $70/month each in subscription fees. John believes that the open source model will ensure that the best engineering idea wins over the best sales and marketing idea.

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Inside this issue

How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love Bug Scrub

By Ivan Chalif

Bug scrub is a word that strikes fear and hatred into the hearts of many Product Managers (Developers, QA leads, Release Managers, and Project Managers, too). Not because of the purpose of bug scrub—dispositioning recently filed product defects—but because the process behind the purpose can end up being so heinous and painful. The frequent discord and conflicting interests of the participants make such an ordeal one that all-to-frequently ends up being internally-focused rather than customer- or market-focused.

Bug scrub doesn't usually start off as such a mess. Like most things in life, bug scrub starts with good intentions. The goal is to make sure that there are not long periods where bugs are sitting unassigned or waiting for additional details in order to be acted upon. In my experience, bug scrubs get initiated when there is a big release coming and Engineering's feet are being held to the fire on release management issues, but there are other reasons, too.

There is then a push to have a meeting with all of the "key stakeholders" (read: Product Management, Program Management, ENGR, QA, Support, Account Management, even UI designers) so that consensus can be reached about any outstanding issues. At

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Truth in Marketing

By Brian Lawley

Two of the most basic tenets in Marketing are that: 1.) you should never insult your potential customers and 2.) your marketing must be congruent (i.e. you can stretch the truth a bit but you can't cross the line to where it is too far from reality). For this article I'm going to use a well-known (and well-liked) company to illustrate why these are both so important.

Years ago when I was working at Apple as the MacOS Human Interface Product Manager I remember talking with Chris Espinosa, one of the first Apple employees (and still there). We were discussing Apple's latest advertising campaign at the time in which it blatantly put down PC users, telling them they had made "the wrong choice".

It was a hard-hitting campaign that included many good facts to support this argument, but we both agreed that insulting your potential new customer's intelligence was NOT the way to convince them to switch over. After all, customers had made a decision to go with the Windows platform, and telling them they had made a stupid decision wasn't going to give them the ego stroke or the corporate ammunition they needed to consider switching.

Enter Apple's latest campaign, which I believe not only insults potential customers but also violates the law of marketing congruence.

Now before I go any further don't get me wrong - I am a Mac fan, and I believe that the OS and integration with the hardware provides a great experience. I use a dual-processor OSX Mac in my music studio and it provides outstanding performance and results, with very few problems.

That said, I use Windows for work with clients, and left Apple in 1995 (the day Windows 95 shipped). Using Windows on my ThinkPad provides me with a very productive environment - as a business user it is my tool of choice.

Now that you know where I stand (I'm all about using the best tools to get the job done quickly), let's look at Apple's current "I'm a Mac, I'm a PC" ads.

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SVPMA is an all volunteer non-profit association for Product Managers in Silicon Valley and around the San Francisco Bay area.

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- To create a safe network of peers
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Psychologically the first impression from these ads implies that the PC user is an incompetent and misinformed geek. The Mac guy, on the other hand, is a young, smart, cool guy who is portrayed as obviously knowing "the truth". This sets up an instant conflict in the mind of anyone who is relatively happy using a PC - who would want to be labeled as that geeky guy? But worse than this, the Apple commercials cross the marketing congruence line.

If you are fairly knowledgeable once you watch a few of the Apple ads you quickly catch on that the advertising is too far out of touch with reality to be believable. Again, one of the fundamental tenets of good advertising and marketing is that it has to be congruent enough with reality - if you stretch it too far people will catch on, your credibility will be shot and you won't be considered as a choice.

I could go through and argue point-by-point about what Apple is trying to get across in each of the ads (fewer viruses, run both operating systems, etc.), but that's not the point of this article. Some of their points are absolutely correct, but for me I know in my gut that the experiences they are describing with Windows versus a Mac are too exaggerated and don't match my truth. And I have to tell you, as an educated user who knows quite a bit about using both operating systems in a real-world environment I feel insulted and flip the channel or mute the sound when I see their ads.

Maybe the masses don't feel this way and won't catch on. But if the masses ask people who are knowledgeable and open-minded for a recommendation about what to buy then the campaign could completely fail. It's quite possible that the ads will only ring true to the Mac faithful.

So what's the moral of the story? When you are creating your core marketing messages and campaigns if you want to win the hearts and minds of potential customers and convert them to your solution, your marketing claims have to match reality closely enough. Don't claim to have a feature that you don't have working yet. Don't tell prospects that you can do something you can't (because they WILL find out you can't). Don't claim your competitors can't do something that everyone knows they can. And most important of all, don't insult your prospect's intelligence. ⌘

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the beginning of the release cycle, bug scrub typically happens once a week or even every other week. The bug dispositioning is contained within the MRD, so there is no need to create parallel processes. However, during the heavy development part of the release cycle (and all the way to the final GA date), these meetings happen more frequently…once or even twice a day.

There are a few key problems with the bug scrub process:

1. Getting all of the "key stakeholders" to participate
2. Bug scrub is not a democracy
3. Ownership of the bug scrub process

With the first problem, you should count on NEVER getting all of the "key stakeholders" in the same room at the same time. The state of modern-day meeting madness makes it more likely that you will either win your state lottery and/or be struck by lightening. All of the real decision makers in most organizations will be in meetings almost perpetually (presumably making decisions).

Determine who the real stakeholders are and focus on them (this is a political game, so do your due diligence and be careful). Get as many as you can into your meeting, even if it is only by conference call. Don't worry that not everyone you invited is there, since the more attendees that show up, the more bureaucracy and noise you will have to fight through.

For those real stakeholders that cannot be there, make sure to follow up with them after to fill them in and solicit their input. That will go a long way toward reinforcing the value of their participation and may encourage them to select your bug scrub meeting over other meetings in the future (or not, your mileage may vary).

Problem number two isn't really a problem for the Product Manager, but it can be a problem for others on the bug scrub team, which usually ends up being a problem for the Product Manager. While the bug scrub process is one that involves input from a variety of groups within your company, the ultimate decision rests with the Product Manager. If that is not the case, then you have a larger issue than a broken bug scrub process.

The purpose of the bug scrub meeting is to gather input. As the Product Manager, you can accept or reject that input. In my own experience, I frequently lean on members of Support, QA and Development to help me understand the implications of the bugs, but ultimately, I have decide whether a bug gets patched, put into the current release (possibly wrecking the schedule), put into a future release or filed away into the purgatory known as "future release." My decision is based on the feedback that I get from others and the priorities that I receive from the senior management, but it's my decision.

The challenge is not making the other members of the bug scrub team feel like their input isn't valuable. It is important, but it's not the only thing that I as the Product Manager need to consider when evaluating each bug individually and in the context of a release.

Finally, the ownership of the bug scrub process and even who drives the meeting can be a contentious issue. In most organizations that I have worked in, the bug scrub starts off being the initiative of someone outside of the Product Management team. This is bad. It means that someone else is filling in a gap

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where the Product Manager or Product Management team is not performing.

It can be tempting to let someone else drive bug scrub because it feels like such a tactical process and as long as the Product Manager is involved in the discussion, then everything is fine, but it's not. The Product Manager MUST own both the process and drive the meeting.

This gets back to the whole perception of filling the void. Both the scheduling and execution of the bug scrub meetings needs to be handled by the Product Manager so that others inside and outside of the process see Product Management taking the lead on priorities. Otherwise, you will notice that more and more product responsibilities will be adopted by others, which doesn't bode well for your success as a Product Manager.

So, here's what you need to do in order to "Love" bug scrub–

1. Figure out who really needs to participate and get them to commit to attending your meetings

2. Solicit feedback from team members, but make decisions that are in the best interests of the product

3. Own the bug scrub meetings and process

4. Remember who is ultimately responsible for the product and then act accordingly

Don't be a bug scrub "hater." Embrace it. Bug scrub can help you take your product to the next level, but it can also be a huge time/productivity vortex. Manage it well and it will be the former rather than the latter. ⌘

Ivan Chalif is a Senior Product Manager at StrongMail Systems and has over 10 years of experience in technology marketing, and web-based products and services at companies like ValueClick, The Gale Group and Acxiom Digital. He fancies himself as both an eloquent blogger and a graceful soccer player. He can be reached at ivan@theproductologist.com.

Homer, Huck and Launching a Product Blog

By Bill Hilton

Writing a blog to promote a product is a great idea, but it's a little harder than it sounds.

Often, the biggest problem is how to get the thing moving. How do you develop the right style and tone of voice? When it comes down to it, what do you say? Finding answers to these questions is tough, but not impossible – and a readable, fun blog can give your product an immense boost, both in your target marketplace and within your organization.

So let's take a look at some strategies for starting that perfect product blog. First things first: where to begin?

When Brad got mad
A product is a story. It has characters (you, the development team, your end-users) and an overarching storyline, from the initial idea to final release and beyond. Your product blog is simply a medium for telling that story.

Writers have been dealing with the problem of how to start stories for thousands of years. The oldest solution is still the best: don't start at the beginning, start in the middle.

Maybe you've seen the 2004 movie *Troy*, or you're familiar with the story it's based on – the 2,700 year-old *Iliad*, by the Ancient Greek poet Homer.

The *Iliad*, which tells the tale of the ten-year war between Trojans and Greeks, is a complex narrative. But Homer wants to do something very simple: hook us from the first sentence. He doesn't bother with backstory, because he knows his readers want action, and fast. So he starts nine years into events:

> *Achilles raged – tell us, goddess, about his insane anger, vicious and doomed, that sent so many brave Greeks down to Hell, great warriors that they were, he made them food for the crows!*

Scary! Homer is talking about the character of Achilles (Brad Pitt in the film), who is refusing to fight because his girlfriend has been taken away by his king. Later, Homer goes back and fills in the details of how the war started and what's happened so far.

Story creators are still using this start-in-the-middle technique today. You can see it at work in movies like *Goodfellas, The Usual Suspects* and the original *Star Wars*. And it's a great way of starting *your* story – your product blog.

With that in mind, here are three strategies for writing those first, tricky, posts:

- Say something exciting right away. That doesn't mean you should write a ton of advertorial screaming about your product's benefits. Just try to start with an arresting story – take a look at 'King Content', below, for ideas.

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- Don't be tempted to fill in all the details too soon. Sure, your product blog should mention designers and developers, but there's no reason to do it in the first post. Cut to the chase!
- If you're still not comfortable getting started, warm up. Put down the first few dozen posts, writing about more or less anything – the initial product idea, the development team, the benefits, whatever. Then simply cut the first three or four, so the first post your readers see is written after you've gotten into the groove. The earlier, discarded material can be cannibalized for later entries, when you need to fill in some backstory.
- Remember readers don't expect blogs to make immediate narrative sense. Few first-time readers will start by digging out the earliest posts. Most will read some recent posts to see if they like your style. Because of this, it can be useful to include prominent links to early posts that establish the facts of what your product is about.

Style: a lesson from *Huck Finn*
The next challenge you have to address is the style and tone of your blog – its 'voice', if you like.

You need to be as relaxed as possible without being overly-familiar. We live in an informal age, and blogging is an informal medium. Ideally, you should aim for a style of writing that is conversational, clear, witty and free of unnecessary technicality – unless, of course, you're writing for an audience of techies. Even then, go easy on the acronyms and jargon.

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Writing in a conversational way isn't as easy as it sounds, but it's worth working on. Why? Because people usually respond better – and keep reading – when you talk to them in their own, everyday language.

Mark Twain knew this. His great novel, *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, is about the twin evils of racism and slavery – pretty hefty themes. But Twain didn't want his readers to respond to the argument he was making in a purely intellectual way. He wanted them to take it to heart.

So Twain wrote his book in the everyday speech of the Mississippi. At dramatic moments the effect is electric:

> *All right, then, I'll GO to hell...It was awful thoughts and awful words, but they was said. And I let them stay said; and never thought no more about reforming. I shoved the whole thing out of my head, and said I would take up wickedness again, which was in my line, being brung up to it, and the other warn't. And for a starter I would go to work and steal Jim out of slavery again!*

Although I wouldn't recommend offending your audience - as *Huck Finn* still, occasionally, does - you can't deny the effect of ordinary language well used.

Strategies:

Never use a long word when a short one will do.

- Avoid writing sentences that you wouldn't use or hear in everyday conversation.
- Don't be shy of using slang, idiom and fashionable speech patterns. Writing how your audience speaks can be, like, really engaging? (Just don't force it – if you try to sound like you're down with the kids, you may wind up sounding like their grandparents.)
- Avoid clichés and management-speak ("*...the utilization of paradigm-shifting design has clearly impacted our core market...*"*)*. Stay plain and simple.
- Stick to conventions of spelling, punctuation and grammar unless you really need to break them to make a point.

King Content
Enough literature. Let's think about what you're actually going to say.

You don't have to talk about your product. That may sound crazy, but if you're writing to drive web traffic your

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first priority should be to hook the readers. If you're more likely to do that by writing about a related topic, rather than your product itself, do it.

A while back I was taken on by Spamcube.com to write *Fishing in the Spam Can*, a blog (now defunct, having served its purpose) designed to build a buzz around the SpamCube anti-spam device.

Rather than focussing on the product itself and how it worked – which would have become repetitive after the first few posts - I wrote about the spam emails I received. I never ran out of ideas, because every day brand new junk was landing in my spam folder.

On the other hand, if your blog focuses on your product, that's fine. Just don't forget that the most interesting posts are often based on the experiences and personalities of the people involved in the product – and you want your readers to be interested, right?

Journalists will tell you that people love to read about people. They call it 'human interest'. Take a look at any media news source. You won't find many stories that haven't had the human angle emphasized.

So whenever you can, focus on the folks – the product's creators, vendors and end-users. Chief designer just had a baby? Blog it. Customer made a chair by gluing your products together, and posted the video on YouTube? Blog it.

Good content is rich and varied. Of course you should also talk about milestones your product has passed, sales figures and customer testimonials. You can also use your blog to make product announcements, carry out unofficial surveys and tell your readers about issues and good causes you're interested in. Just remember to serve it all up with a sprinkling of the fun stuff.

A fantastic example of a successful product blog is the Official Google Blog (googleblog.blogspot.com). It has a variety of contributors, who talk about their backgrounds and their work at Google, as well as regular updates on causes and campaigns the Big G is taking an interest in – particularly the issue of green energy. The Google blog has a serious purpose, but it is people-focussed and not afraid to have fun.

Finally, some strategies for getting that content dead right:

- Remember what we said at the start: a product is a story, and your product blog is you telling that story.
- Stories have characters. With their consent, talk about the personalities involved in your product. Better, get them to write about themselves.
- Embed images, sound files and video for a more rounded user experience.
- Push the benefits of your product, but do it discreetly. If visitors want to find out more, they can always head to your main sales pages. ⌘

Bill Hilton is a UK-based copywriter and freelance feature writer specializing in technology, finance and business. You can read his blog at www.billhilton.biz.

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John mentioned that open source software is not as dependent on VC funding as proprietary software. Once the core package open source code is hosted on the web, users modify it and customized applications are developed. Testing and validation by user communities – a significant portion of them being Universities – results in quick stabilization of the product. The efficiency of the model is reflected by the fact that in less than two years of inception open source SugarCRM was available in 75 languages. Subscription revenue generated by the small subset of subscribers is fed back into development of the product.

The open source model does a great job of listening to needs of the community through user forums that drive ideas from a product management perspective. A focus on user adoption by making software easy to demo, self serve and evaluate, minimizes sales, development and deployment costs. Open source wins over proprietary software by offering royalty free distribution, author attribution and no restriction on use. John believes that open source thrives by earning the right to a customer's business, providing value by making the global user community part of the engineering process, and providing on-demand or on-site open source products with a distributed architecture. He contrasted this with the lock-in, on-demand, proprietary monolithic closed source products offered by the traditional model.

To manage the integrity and stability of the open source model, SugarCRM offers several areas to serve the customized needs of its users, including SugarNetworks for online training, Sugar Plug-Ins for integration with Microsoft Outlook and Word, and professional support through SugarCRM support. Further, Sugar Exchange serves as the online components marketplace for Sugar extensions and SugarForge as the epicenter of new projects.

In conclusion John emphasized that open source software has unleashed 'biological warfare' on proprietary code and that it will win by providing more innovative software more efficiently and at less risk, allowing more efficient use of capital and a worldwide reach achieved with low cost of sales. ⌘

Vithi Singh is a product management professional in the high-tech industry. She has had seven years of experience in product and project management, for both software as well as hardware products, and enjoys the challenge offered by business turn-around situations. She can be reached at vithi.singh@fuqua.duke.edu