

The Day Our Software Got Off The Ground

by Steve Neiderhauser

One sunny Tuesday in April of 1994, after Ed Dillon finished his morning meeting with MCI management, he shook his head for a moment and said, “You can lead a horse to water, but you can’t make him think.” Management had just shot down another one of Ed’s ideas. We traded horse stories for several minutes until a commotion in the main conference room ended our fun.

Our boss stepped from the room and motioned for us to join them. In the meeting, we learned that the hardware group purchased the wrong computers for the NeXT Operating System—NeXT needs a fast disk drive and a quality graphics card. The specs were available in manuals, available in books, and available in brochures; someone overlooked the obvious.

What’s more, just last week the hardware group told management there wasn’t a problem in sight.

Surprise.

Cathy Cooper, the Vice President of Technology, glared at the hardware team and said, “You all lied to me!” Ed nudged me just in time to see the vein in her neck throb as if it would burst. Cathy ranted for five more minutes, then ended the meeting when she stormed out of the room.

The storm rocked the good ship hardware. Helpless and adrift, her crew grumbled that they didn’t get a chance to tell their side of the story. A chance to spin their tale of confusion with silky-smooth words — NextStep, OpenStep, distributed object, enterprise object, Application Kit...

The answer was simple enough. Would management, however, see the value of our solution through the muddy waters, stirred by the endless ramblings of technology people? Probably not. Ed and I mused a minute and quick as lightning it dawned upon us.

We called our contact at a local vendor and asked about hardware solutions for NeXT. Having received our help with a sale two weeks earlier, the salesperson was eager to assist.

At 4:07 that same afternoon he delivered a NeXT workstation. We configured it within the hour and positioned the machine in a common work area. We made sure the standard applications were visible and compiled a software demo reserved for developers: The bouncing-red-ball demo. Its eye-catching graphics begged us to let the software run overnight. How could we resist!

The following morning, we noticed several people hovering over the workstation. One influential fellow named Pete (some executives wouldn't make a technology move without him) asked, "Who owns this sleek machine?"

"Oh... it's ours," said Ed. "For a research project. If it's bothering you, we can move it to another room."

"No, that's okay," said Pete waiting for his turn to test drive the machine. If you looked into Pete's eyes, you could see the wheels spinning in his head.

After playing with NeXT's sparkling user interface and gazing upon the bouncing-ball demo, employees called their friends and spread the word.

Jumping from cubicle-top to cubicle-top, word spread like wildfire. Soon the entire company was ablaze with the idea that a NeXT solution had been delivered within 12 hours. Like a show under the big top, you could tell people were thrilled by NeXT's performance just by the sounds that filled the air—"ooh, aah."

By mid-afternoon, Cathy Cooper had heard enough. Now she had to see for herself. She waded through the sea of people lapping against the edges of the workstation and watched as Pete put the software through its paces.

Unlike yesterday's tempest, Cathy looked calm on the surface, although inside, she felt nervous because... the "Problem" has landed. She asked the group a series of questions. You could see her eyes get wider with each answer—as though a light had been turned on in a dark room.

Awakened by the glowing workstation, Cathy pounced on it like a cat on a field mouse. Before the end of the day, she would order 57 new workstations.

Seven days later, when the software got off the ground, beaming faces were seen all around.