



FROM THE PUBLISHER

Promoting Free Markets

Competition relies on choice and others in the market recognizing that they should not take our choices for granted.

PHIL HUGHES

A few days ago, I signed up for an account on the <http://amplalian.com> Web site. I then made a purchase, and at the end of credit-card processing, I got nothing back. That is, no completion page—only a blank page like the form I had just submitted.

As I had received the usual “welcome to our site” e-mail, I responded to it with my concern about my order. Here is what I said:

I am somewhat concerned. I placed an order. Clicked on confirm (for credit-card processing), and after about a minute, I just got back a blank version of the page I had previously been on. So, not sure it got ordered. Note that I am using the Konqueror Web browser, and some sites don't handle the pages properly.

I received two responses. One was from the sales people about sorting out my order. The second one, however, surprised me. Here it is:

Phil,

I apologize for the problem you had with your order. We have recently installed a new credit-card processing system, and unfortunately we didn't have the opportunity to test it with Konqueror.

The minute delay you experienced is the time taken for our server to contact the HSBC secure payment server and to receive the response from them. However, it concerns me that you were taken back to the payment details page after this point.

In order to solve this problem, I wonder if you could answer a couple of questions for me please:

Do you know if your browser is set up to accept session cookies?

Did you do anything on the site after being taken back to the payment details page?

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How did you come to the site originally?

Were you behind a proxy server or firewall when you accessed the site?

Also, I'd be very grateful to know the version of your OS and of Konqueror you are using so that we can test this process fully.

Thank you for your help, Chris

I believe this is the first time I have received a reply to a Web-related problem that didn't include an explanation of how the site would likely work better with IE or that possibly it would also work with Netscape.

Beyond that, Chris didn't ask me what Konqueror was, and he didn't use the M word once. It was as if he has taken seriously the idea that the Web is really platform-independent.

Why do I believe this is so important? I feel it has implications way beyond the Web. Take the Oasis Open Document Format as another example. The MS-Word format for documents became a de facto standard at the expense of its competitors. There wasn't anyone saying that Microsoft shouldn't be able to sell a word

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processor. The issue was that Microsoft should not get special treatment in the market. With the adoption of the Oasis format, Microsoft will be forced to "play fair". That is, as people move to this portable format, they will pick Microsoft Word only if it is the best choice technically and financially.

At the very least, we are just promoting a free market. Linux itself is, of course, a big player there. In all these cases, we are just supporting the idea that the consumer should not get locked in—that the consumer should continue to have a choice.

We see this in the GNOME vs. KDE wars. At a minimum, having choice out there encourages each to try to be better than the competition. Some parts of better are clear. More reliable, more secure and runs faster are just plain good. But, there is more. If we do what we can to make sure there are choices that interoperate, market share will no longer be just a function of marketing.

Customer demand actually gets back into the equation.

If you want to help promote this openness, there are some things you can do. First, if you are using Konqueror, make sure it identifies itself as Konqueror. In the Browser Identification configuration menu, you can set this. Generally this is the default. The point is, don't pretend you are IE—show your Linux stripes.

When sharing documents, suggest an open format such as the Oasis one. Or, better yet, suggest to others that they at least try an office suite such as OpenOffice.org. It's just, well, open.

And remember, none of this means you saying Linux is the only answer. It is just you saying there should be choices. Even with choices, not everyone will pick Linux, but a lot of us will. And, the more we have on our team, the easier it is to make our team grow.■

Phil Hughes is Group Publisher for SSC Publishing, Ltd.