MS and the EU: naming a non-starter

NIGEL J. ROSS

Microsoft is launching its Windows XP 'Edition N' in Europe after a long wrangle with the European Union, ***but…***

THE EU recently forced Microsoft to issue a second version of its Windows XP operating system without a built-in Windows Media Player, ruling that, by bundling its own media player, Microsoft was effectively blocking competition from rivals (particularly Real Player and QuickTime). Microsoft's monopolistic approach in this case also landed it a fine of €497.2 million ($665m). The wrangling lasted well over a year, during which time Windows XP with bundled media player had been sold so widely in Europe as to partly invalidate the EU's attempts at stopping the US company monopolising and controlling the market. 'The second version of Windows will reflect what consumers want, and not what Microsoft imposes on them,' was the triumphant but belated comment of Mario Monti, the former EU Commissioner in charge of competition.

Ten names that didn't make it

After the ruling, the EU Commission and Microsoft found themselves again at loggerheads over what to call the alternative second version of the Windows XP system (without Windows Media Player) that Microsoft has to make available on the European market. Apparently, Microsoft suggested a possible name for the second version that didn't suit the Commission, and then the Commission put forward another possible nine names, which didn't meet with the company's approval. Microsoft originally suggested 'Windows XP Reduced Media Edition', while, unofficially, the Commission's nine rejected options were: 'Windows XP not incorporating Windows Media Player', 'Windows XP not including Windows Media Player', 'Windows XP NIWMP', 'Windows XP/B', 'Windows XP/N', 'Windows OS/U', 'Windows OS/B', 'Windows OS/N', and 'Windows OS/C'.

Here, XP stands for 'Experience' (Microsoft has more or less explained the two letters in these terms), NIWMP stands for 'Not Including/Incorporating Windows Media Player', N stands for 'Not with Windows Media Player', U stands for 'Unbundled', OS stands for 'Operating System', and B stands for 'B-version'. However, quite what 'C' stands for remains a bit of a mystery.

Evidently the European Commission objected to Microsoft's suggestion of 'Windows XP Reduced Media Edition' because of the word 'reduced'. Since the Commission does not have the power to make Microsoft sell the second version at a lower price, it baulked at the idea of anyone even considering buying a 'reduced' version at the same price as the 'full' version. The idea of 'less for more' is obviously not an attractive proposition for European Commissioners, and presumably Microsoft felt that the Commission's suggestions were not feasible for such reasons as clarity, length, and confusion.

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The name that says it all?

Although we are not aware of how the negotiations proceeded, we do know that the final outcome was a compromise. The new version without Windows Media Player will be known as 'Edition N'; in other words, computer users in Europe will also be offered the basic and professional versions of Windows XP in scaled-down editions: Windows XP Home Edition N and Windows XP Professional Edition N, the N standing for 'Not with Windows Media Player'. The Commission is said to be happy, and Microsoft likewise, or at least publicly ready to accept this new name. Said Horacio Gutierrez, Microsoft's top lawyer, as reported on BBC News:

> We have some misgivings about the chosen name, as we fear it may cause confusion for consumers about the product, but we will adopt the Commission's name in order to move forward and accelerate the pace of the implementation process.

The compromise hinges on how the 'Edition N' addition is interpreted. The EU in Brussels feels it is a fairly neutral (N for neutral?) solution that will neither attract customers nor keep them at bay. Microsoft, on the other hand, must feel that it is a name with very little selling power (N for negative?). The Commission's efforts have been described as naïve by John Allert, chief operating officer at the British office of Interbrand, a global marketing consultancy. He is reported in the *International Herald Tribune* as saying:

> This is a very savvy marketing organization … embarking on a brand-naming exercise purposely designed to be ineffective.

He goes on to say that it is little wonder that Microsoft agreed to the letter N: the first letter of the word for *no* in most languages in Europe. What's more, many negative prefixes have an *n*-sound to them: *un-*, *in-*, *non-*, etc., and (again) not only in English.

The language aspect

So what is in the name *Edition N*? Linguistically, the word *edition* is fairly neutral, unless of course it is hyped up to a 'new edition'. It should be pointed out, however, that in the world of computers few people would consider upgrading to a new edition of a program at any great expense, since the next edition is usually just the old edition with a few minor improvements – free, OK, but not for payment!

The letter *N*, on the other hand, is interesting. Firstly, it is a particularly unproductive letter. The *N* section in English dictionaries is, surprisingly, one of the shortest, leaving aside such unusual letters as *K* and *X*). And while *N* does start a few positive words, such as *nice*, it is particularly common as the first letter for negative terms: *no*, *not*, *non*, *never*, *nasty*, *negative*, and so on. And, as John Allert has pointed out, *n*-words are also usually negative in most other European languages. In other words, *N* is a *n*on-starter.

However, Microsoft can't be so disappointed after all. Edition N of its Windows XP operating system has been described as an 'unwanted baby', and it is unlikely that the company will do anything to publicise it. It will be offered at the same price as the full edition but no promotion will be carried out, and even *OEM*s ('original equipment manufacturers') are unlikely to bundle their computers with Edition N for fear of losing customers.

On the Internet, bloggers have for other reasons been decrying the Commission's shortsightedness in allowing the new name to go forward. They point out that the two versions of XP (Home and Professional, the professional version also including Office programs such as Word, Excel and Powerpoint) are likely to be abbreviated to *Windows XP HomeN* and *Windows XP ProN*, the latter being a particularly inappropriate abbreviation.

Pron or *Pr0n* is in fact 'leet-speak' for *porn*(*ography*). Leet-speak ('élite-speak'), also known as *l33t-speak* or *1337-speak*, is used by bloggers, discussion-group participants, and others posting information to bulletin boards and websites in order to circumvent language- and content-filters, 'net-nannies', and the like, by using misspellings and/or mixtures of letters and numbers. A 'pron' edition thus takes on a particular negative connotation for anyone in-the-know about such jargon. (As one blogger puts it: 'Of course, one has to be geeky enough to know, and admit to knowing, what "pron" means.')

Neutral and negative

The *Edition N* appellative will probably turn out to be a total non-starter, partly because of the lateness of its launch, partly because of a

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lack of any promotion surrounding the product, partly because it is relatively overpriced, and partly because it sounds poor (or suggestive). Perhaps we should simply be dumbfounded all the time, energy and creativity spent in thinking up this *n*eutral-cum-*n*egative sounding *n*ame for a *n*on-starter, an unattractive waste of time that is likely to keep geeky leet-speakers smiling knowingly for some years to come. ■

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