

Buy me and stop one

I was idly musing through a computer magazine or two this week when it struck me just how much this industry now wallows in nonsense, ambiguity and I presume, hyperbole. If it was part of the food or the fashion industries, I would not only understand it, but expect it and if eating my 'Oatflake Delight' did not temporarily transport me to Nirvana as advertised, I would not be out to sue. The law even allows for this under the general cloak of 'advertisers puff' or bollocks. I would expect a little more of the Computing Industry however.

Take for example, the use of the word 'availability'. This is a standard way of obfuscating in systems provision. In conventional engineering, we use the concept of 'reliability' to mean obvious measures such as MTBF (Mean Time Between Failures), MTTF (Mean Time To Fail) and PFOD (Probability of Failure on Demand) as appropriate for the system. Such measures have an immediate impact for example if I tell you a modern disc drive has a MTBF of 1,000,000 hours, (about 114 years), you would not expect it to break very often. In contrast, 99.9% availability may sound good but for a computer system it corresponds to about 1 crash a day which is hopeless. If I make it boot twice as quickly say by turning off the disc checks, it climbs to 99.95% but it still crashes once a day. In other words, by making the system worse in an important way, I can actually improve its availability. This is why of course people use availability instead of reliability, it can hide a multitude of sins.

System providers are still doing it of course. I noticed a full page ad for Microsoft SQL Server 2005 this week. It said their customer's "largest application requires 99.999% availability and it runs on new SQL Server 2005". It then marks this with a microscopic footnote in white on a whitish background (I had to use a magnifying glass to read it) with the comment "Results not typical ...". Let us analyse this in three ways. First, 99.999% availability is the computer industry's way of telling you the system crashes about once every 2 months which is not very good and considerably worse than Linux for example. Second, the sentence says the application requires it but it does NOT say that SQL Server 2005 delivers it. Third, the footnote explains that its irrelevant anyway - truly a splendid example of incisive and informative English, but would you risk investing on statements of this nature? If I return my 'Oatflake Delight' I don't have to send my teeth with it.

Shaking my head with a sigh, I then ploughed head on into an article detailing the various IT plans of the Department of Work and Pensions in which I found the following statement by the Minister of State for Pensions. "We are future-proofing the business through systematic industry benchmarking to get industry-leading value for money." Does anybody know what this is supposed to mean? The words are all in my dictionary but they are strung together in a way which carefully eliminates any meaning.

This of course is much of the problem. Many specifications I have seen and continue to see are written in content-free form like this. Caveat emptor.

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