Does Microsoft Suck?

Ramblings by Michael Dortch -- September 11 and 22, 1996

"Are [sic] you a fool, or a nutcase??? How in this world can you even think to premote [sic] Microsoft?? How much did you get paid by Billy Gate$?? Or did you [sic] pay AmbrosiaSW??? What A lie!!!" -- my first letter from an Ambrosia Times reader.

"Microsoft sucks." -- my second letter from a presumably different Ambrosia Times reader

So I said that Microsoft might possibly not be the entire Evil Empire, and I actually got mail from some of you Ambrosia fans. Well, you could sort of call it mail.

As you can see, one writer accused me of being paid off by Bill Gates. The same writer suggested that perhaps I had bribed Ambrosia to let me offer the opinion that maybe Microsoft had actually done one or two useful things in the computing industry over the past few years. The other writer summed up the rage, fear and loathing an apparently large section of you readers seem to feel. What you see is the entire content of that reader's e-missive: "Microsoft Sucks."

Now, I'm not even going NEAR the implications raised by the obvious literary merit and thoughtful debate raised by such letters. (You never know -- one or both writers could actually BE 13- or 14-year-old pre-literates.) But I had and have to respond.

But here's the point, as I see it (and this IS my column, after all). What has Microsoft and/or Bill Gates (two entities people seem to have a difficult time considering separately) done to create such enmity in the heartland and hinterlands of the computing world? Is it warranted? Does it matter?

What Microsoft and Gates did was to dominate a market before a lot of folks realized it was a market. And if you believe the interviews Gates gives, and I do about this, most of what he's done since then has been out of fear. A fear of being blind-sided by a new technology or market force that leaves Gates and Microsoft out to dry.

And no, it's not just personal, selfish greed and the desire to continue trampling on the marketplace that drives this in Gates. In case you hadn't noticed, Microsoft's created more millionaires aside from its well-known co-founder than almost any other company in history. It's just the kind of guy Bill is -- or was about 15 years ago, when I got to spend some time with him occasionally when he came to visit my friend, housemate and industry colleague, the late Blair Newman.

So is the "Microsoft sucks" sobriquet warranted? Not if you're talking personally or generically about Gates or Microsoft. Does the company do things that seem stupid, silly, disingenuous or

just plain wrong? Sometimes, yes. Are its products the best in the marketplace, or even the best they can possibly be? Not always, no. What's this mean? That neither Microsoft nor Bill Gates is anywhere near perfect. Just like almost any other company or CEO you could name.

Do I like it that Microsoft's name is on or their technology in almost every piece of software I use? Not really. But you know, in the final analysis, it doesn't really matter what Microsoft does, or what folks like us think about it or them. What matters is that Microsoft, like Apple, Digital Research, IBM and a bunch of other companies and people, jumped in and helped jump-start this industry before it was an industry. You may not like Microsoft or its products, but if Bill Gates hadn't done everything he did when he did it, the industry we all love and love to hate would be way, way different right now -- if it existed at all.

And besides, it's not like Microsoft dominates every single market it wants to or originally did. The folks at Netscape and elsewhere are continuing to see to that, for which we should all be thankful. But if you listen carefully, you can already hear people grumbling about how Netscape sucks, is crushing all its competitors and is going to become ... the next Microsoft. Sigh. Plus ca change [the more things change] ...

Frankly, I'd be interested in hearing what more of you think about Microsoft, it's role in this ever-interesting industry, and its likely legacy. But only if you promise to use a spell-checker, or at least some of the more widely-accepted standards for grammar, spelling and etiquette. (I don't mind strong language or humor at all, though, especially if you don't mind being quoted, anonymously or with attribution, your choice). So write to me -- or you'll have to read whatever *I* decide next time. And you've already seen what THAT can cause ...

Ed Note -- Michael Dortch has written, talked and thought about new technologies and their effects on people and businesses for about 20 years. He is based in San Francisco, and welcomes comments at medortch@aol.com.