

few days ago, I received a call from a die-hard, Windows 95-is-the-best-OS- bar-none, Wintel head. What he had to say truly shocked me.

This particular person, who, I might add, can rewrite config.sys files in his sleep and probably dreams of debugging Netware NLMs, called to say he was on the edge of converting to the Macintosh. He was actually considering purchasing a Mac.

Wow, I thought. Could this event signal the fall of the Western Civilization? I mean, for the last 10 years, this man has shunned the cult called Macintosh and disavowed any redeeming purpose for any of Apple's products.

Our caller, who I'll call Charlie, proceeded to tell me that he'd recently been to a local Internet Service Provider and that the ISP was using Macs as Web, DNS and everything-but-the-kitchen-sink servers. Now, Charlie readily admits that he laughed when he first saw a bank of Apple Internet Servers sitting there, chugging away, but he says he converted when he saw the simplicity of maintaining one. Oh, and the speed was pretty cool as well, he said.

All of this leads up to the real point of this month's column, which is that Apple is truly Apple's worst enemy. Recall, if you will, that last month every publication on the planet was telling tall tales about the demise of Apple Computer. From the cartoon strip Doonesbury to the Wall Street Journal, any and every printed product was playing soothsayer and declaring Apple dead.

So, if that's the case, someone forgot to tell the folks who dish out the annual computer

awards. Not to mention that someone overlooked the folks who actually use and abuse computers on a daily basis.

You see, my email boxes have been filled to the brim of late with announcements from Apple's Spin Doctors touting that the Mac has won this award or that. Or that the Newton OS was ranked highest among PDAs. Or that Apple's logo is still the coolest outside of Silicon Graphics.

Of course, these announcements are strategically placed by the folks whose job is to protect Apple's orchard. But, what the casual observer may overlook is that these awards are real. You see, not even Apple would make up the fact that PC Magazine voted Apple best in this category or that (it really did). Nope, just plain making stuff up is the surest way to get canned just about anywhere and especially in Silicon Valley's cutthroat PR world.

Over the last month or so, I've read where PC magazines are rating the Macintosh tops in terms of ease of use, reliability and functionality. I've read where Apple and Adobe are blazing ahead to establish a new standard for fonts on the Internet. In fact, by now, we've all probably read that Apple is forming alliances with all comers to establish itself as the 'Net machines.

And, all of this from the company that's (a) about to go about of business and (b) preaching to the choir.

I say Apple is preaching to the choir because the folks who subscribe to Guy Kawasaki's Evangelist listserver or who get mass emails from Apple employees are precisely the ones Apple does not need to reach. Nope, those of us who get these transmissions are probably bordering on fanaticism anyway, so the electrons are wasted.

Although I enjoy reading the email I receive from Apple, I believe the Cupertino-based company should focus its attention on the computer-buying and stock-trading masses. As I see it, these are the real movers and shakers, not to mention the ones who push the stock price up and down, which translates to the press' perception of Apple's health.

And the timing is perfect, what with a new president and CEO just getting his feet wet. I'm sure Apple's PR folks are quaking in their boots worrying about what new curves are going to be thrown at them. For a cutting-edge company like Apple to suffer with its marketing is an embarrassment. For Apple to allow it to continue is insane.

Let's face it, marketing makes a product. Gone are the days when something could stand on its own and still sell like hotcakes. Now we have multi-level marketing and budgets that often exceed the development costs. Over the last eight to 10 years or so, marketing has become the dominant aspect of computing.

Remember the roll out of Windows 95? Microsoft and the companies representing it literally made the market. There's something to be said for a group of companies that can garner front-page coverage on USA TODAY for a product that was almost three years late. And, outside of Windows 95, just about everyone know that Microsoft will take you "where you want to go today."

Tragically, Apple's PR firms have not fared as well. Or, more likely, Apple has not allowed them to plant visions of multicolored fruit in our head. Nope, I gather that Apple's senior management tends to think that the stoic, conservative approach will work best. I say this based on conversations with current and former Apple employees who cringed at the

marketing roll out of the PCI-based Macs.

Journey with me back to June 1995 when Apple was ramping up for the introduction of the hot new PCI-based Macs. A whole new era on Mac computing. Say goodbye to the NuBus technology of the 1980s and greet the industry standard PCI architecture of the 1990s. Instant compatibility bundled with the raw power and speed of the PowerPC 604 processor. A killer computer. Killer prices. Killer possibilities.

Killer in every sense of the word, except for the fact that many people didn't hear the first word about the new machines until they saw a magazine ad or two. The same ads that have been running since. Sure, Apple got its share of preannouncement buzz from the Mac Press, but the mainstream left the PCI announcement alone.

Apple missed an opportunity to announce, once and for all, that it was going to face the Win95 challenge and come out the winner. But, as always, Apple's initiative was too little, too late, and the PCI-based Macs took a distant backseat to Windows 95. Then again, everything took a second seat that week to Windows 95.

This lack of PR prowess has hurt Apple since the mid-1980s. Anyone remember the Lemmings commercial? To me, that ill-fated sequel to "1984" was the beginning of the end of Apple PR. No one took it seriously after that commercial ran.

And with good reason. The culture of Apple demanded the sequel to "1984" be grander and more vivid than the original. And to this day, nothing has had the impact of "1984". In fact, for many people (myself included), having a QuickTime movie of this epic commercial is almost nirvana.

Most people and companies learn from their mistakes. Sometimes Apple does and sometimes it doesn't. For example, the last few years around Christmas, Apple has bought time on various cable stations and aired its own infomercial. This has to be one of the all time worst. If you've seen it you know what I mean: Impossible family buys computer and the machine makes life all better.

Yeah, right. Even though this infomercial is geared to spurring Performa sales, Apple's done a terrible job hyping its products. Could these people be any less lifelike? Even June Cleaver would cringe at this family's perfection.

Sometimes I think the Performa infomercial mirrors life at Apple. Shiny, plastic people who solve all their problems by getting a new Mac. Substitute "getting" for "introducing", and you have the nucleus to Apple's philosophy for the last couple of years.

I tend to think that with the right mixture of PR, product and hype, there may be a few more people like my friend Charlie. People who would love Apple technology and embrace the culture we call Macintosh. If they could just find out about it.

[im Hines explores the darker side of the Macintosh and PC culture in 'Blue Sunshine' Write to Jim at \[jhines@iglou.com\]\(mailto:jhines@iglou.com\), or simply 'Jim Hines' on America Online.](mailto:jhines@iglou.com)

