Divorce, Trust and Microsoft

Conversations that start off: "Microsoft can't be trusted because...." remind me of divorce/custody cases I handled as a lawyer. Any discussion of any custody or visitation started the same way. But it was also true that the lawyer for the other side and I both had to get our clients beyond that in order to fashion workable agreements.

And those agreements had to take into account that both our clients felt like the other side was untrustworthy, inconsiderate, unreliable, etc. So there was an element of taking small steps to reduce the amount of distrust if not actually to build up some trust between the parties. One common element of those steps was to have any interaction in some public place.

Since I am more familiar with the issues and communities around Open XML and OpenDocument, I want to suggest some trust building steps that could be taken there, although I am sure similar things can be said about PDF and XPS.

For example, Microsoft is joining the ODF TC at OASIS. An easy first step would be to begin working on the formulas work in the TC. ODF 1.2 will include formula definitions, but those in Open XML don't match those used by Excel 2007 and the collective user community doesn't need another set of incompatible definitions. Members of the ODF TC should work very hard to make Microsoft members feel welcome and to get the formula work aligned with a set of common definitions.

Another step, since Microsoft is going to be supporting OpenDocument in its product line, would be to host a conference on using OpenDocument with Microsoft products. That would be an excellent opportunity to both demonstrate the seriousness of the Microsoft commitment to OpenDocument as well as to extend a welcoming hand to members of that community. Not to mention it could serve as the kick off point for the development of a robust OpenDocument community within the Microsoft ecosystem.

Perhaps a Microsoft resource site on OpenDocument? A website that offers free tools, information and resources on OpenDocument and Microsoft products. Including forums for people who want to discuss how to better make use of OpenDocument with those products. Perhaps even with sections for vertical industries, such as governments, who have shown an interest in OpenDocument based systems.

None of these steps are particularly profound but taken together they can change the nature of the relationship between many software vendors. A change that can only benefit their customers, who for many years have been treated like children in a ugly visitation war. Speaking strictly for myself, I am tired of the abusive, non-productive and ultimately pointless bickering between vendors that don't benefit them or us.

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