

AIM IM with Zak Greant.

10/13/06, 4:00 PM

This transcript has been (slightly) edited for spelling and punctuation.

Olivia Ryan: Hello Zak.

Zak Greant: Hi Olivia.

OR: Is now still a good time for you?

ZG: It still is.

OR: Great. I guess I'll begin by asking you a bit about your current role within Mozilla. On your blog you say that as your role as ombudsman you "often help represent the interests of the Mozilla public to the Mozilla Foundation (and via the Foundation to the Mozilla, Corporation)."

Who is the Mozilla public and in what ways do you engage with it?

ZG: The Mozilla public is any person or organization that can effect change on the Mozilla Foundation - either directly or indirectly.

As for how I engage with the community, that is a fairly broad question with a fairly broad answer: it is a mix of being available when people want to get in touch and actively seeking out people to find their needs, interests and opinions. We have also been doing interviews with people. Interviews can be very effective because they provide both valuable information and an easy way to jump start real discussions.

OR: Who have you interviewed? (Users, employees, people working for companies that work on Mozilla products etc?)

ZG: So far I have been focusing on trial interviews with people who are somewhat representative of the broad Mozilla public - developers, office workers, civil servants, students, Free Software and Open Source community leaders, company leaders and so on. As I get feedback on how the interviews work with them, I further refine the questions.

As long as the Mozilla Foundation team is happy with the trial runs, we plan to seek broader distribution of the questions via programming magazines, student papers, community mailing lists and so on.

OR: From what you can tell so far what would you say are the primary interests or concerns of Mozilla public and how has (or has) this changed over time? (Another broad question, I know.)

ZG: No worries. Almost everyone has the same fundamental response: "I want technology that serves me (and not the other way around.)" I think that this has changed

over time from a basic position of, "The software just works." Come to think of it, I would love to interview your team and the people you have been interviewing.

OR: Oh great! We'd be delighted! How would you list Mozilla's priorities? I know you didn't work with Mozilla in 1998, but from what you know, how has its priorities changed over time? Is it just a recognition of building technology to serve the user, or have there been other substantial changes or shifts?

ZG: Simply put, I would list our priorities as: First, help preserve choice and foster innovation on the Net. A key part of this is giving people more choice of over their use of the Net via Firefox and Thunderbird.

Second, now that we have a more flexible organizational structure (that being of a non-profit that owns a for-profit company), we can start to think more creatively. The Mozilla Corporation shepherds the Firefox and Thunderbird development efforts and is working to support the broad family of related Mozilla projects. This allows the Foundation to focus on how its mission practically fits into the current state of the Net. Important parts of this exploration are activities like working to actively involve more of the public and building our knowledge by sharing ideas and experience with friendly organizations (like Ashoka and Benetech).

OR: I am not sure how much you may or may not be involved in the marketing of Mozilla's products, but I'd be interested to hear your views on how open source principles influence marketing techniques? The Spread Firefox website states that Spread ffx was "founded on the same principles of community involvement that drive the development and testing of Firefox." Do you see marketing as something the community can do or does there come a point when it might require marketing experts?

ZG: I don't actively participate in marketing Mozilla's products, but I do have opinions here. Truly great marketing comes from passionate and meaningful communication within a group. There are people who lead or are the keystone for these discussions, but as often as not, they are not labeled as marketing experts (though they may well be).

One note - by group, I mean a larger community - not just a group of people working on marketing. In fact, I probably should have said, "Truly great marketing comes from passionate and meaningful communication within and between communities."

OR: Spread Firefox seems like an example of that type of community. Why Spread Firefox and not spread Mozilla? Do you think the other products benefit from Spread Firefox?

ZG: Spread Firefox indirectly markets the entire Mozilla gestalt. It benefits the other projects due to their association with Firefox and Mozilla, and (perhaps most importantly) it provides a transparent and engaging example of ways for communities to effectively share their enthusiasm.

OR: Switching gears for a minute, as I know we're running out of time...Do you consider open source software projects as public service work?

ZG: An interesting question. While Free Software and Open Source projects usually benefit society as a whole, they are often even more important to the direct participants. Many people who participate in Free Software and Open Source projects find that the work has great positive impact on their life: feeding their career, building deep friendships with others and expanding their experience of the world.

OR: What (if anything) do you think the popularity of Firefox will do for the open source software movement as a whole? Also, do you think open source techniques can be applied to other areas of production in today's society?

ZG: Firefox is positive proof that Free Software and Open Source projects can write good software for non-developers. It should help teach us, as a community of primarily developers, how we can better interact with the rest of the software-using world. Of course, the project also helps make more people aware of the benefits of free and open technology and communities.

The ideas behind open source and free software are very simple and stem from a few key factors: (sorry, just trying to phrase them simply) (... and mostly failing)

OR: No prob.

ZG: 1. Most information (books, pictures, software programs, bus schedules, etc.) can be easily and cheaply stored in binary form  
2. Many inexpensive computers make it easy for people to do things with binary data.  
3. The Net makes it easy for people in many areas to share whatever it is that they do with binary data.  
4. Binary data is non-consumable. If I share an apple with a friend, we both have 1/2 an apple. If I share a program I wrote with a friend, we both have a copy.

These things make it very efficient for people to share effort on developing digital resources (like programs or online marketing campaigns or recipes). If groups share effort they can compete much better than groups that hoard information. It is a lot like the changes brought about by important innovations like trade, writing, printing and literacy. Hrm. How coherent does that seem to you?

OR: Great!

ZG: Good good.

OR: Makes total sense. Thanks so much for your time. We really appreciate it.

ZG: Thanks for taking your time. I will drop you a line about my interviews next week.

OR: Sounds good. I'd be interested to hear more about the interviews you're doing as your efforts continue.

ZG: Where possible, they will be public.

OR: Oh fabulous! (and very likely under terms that would allow you to put them into your project).

OR: Yes, I was just going to ask  
Thank you.

ZG: Thanks again. Can you drop me a link when this goes online?

OR: Definitely.

ZG: Thanks! Talk to you next week. Cheers! --zak

OR: Take care, Olivia