

A Call for End-User Advocates

A constant complaint I hear since leaving the user community many years ago from the members of the press and conference organizers is how few end-user advocates there are. People who work in enterprises that are willing to speak out on important issues.

Most users don't think it is worth it or think they will only get in trouble by talking. They are wrong. The press and conferences is one of the best ways to communicate your needs and desires to vendors. Vendors listen very closely to end-users advocates and the good part is that you don't have to be the CIO to be heard.

You used the press to both present your problems and talk about what type of solution you needed. Vendors will be quoting your requirements and building a solution that solved your problem. In effect, you can write the requirement document for products. What happens in the vendor community is the following. Vendors hear a lot from individual customers on what they want. The developers have choose what to work on. Maybe what you want is also desired by a lot of other people but other users don't express it or maybe you are early in understanding the need. By going "public" with your needs or desires others see it. Vendors will then ask around and if it is important, your desire will go to the top of the list. If you don't speak out on what you need maybe no one else will and it will take longer to get the features or products you need.

If you don't know the solution but do know the problem then use the press to get the word out. The press loves to bring up users problems and then ask vendors what they are doing about it.

If you take up the call to start influencing vendors I have one important rule you need to follow: Be positive. Tell people what you would like not what you dislike. While you most likely would like to strike out at a vendor because they made you unhappy, this will only lead to problems for your business and your relationship down the road. It is better to be positive and praise a vendor for doing something you like. They and the other vendors will get the message.

How do you actually become a user advocate? Do one or all of the following:

1. Talk with the press. They are not your enemies trying to get you in trouble (just follow the positive rule). You can find the editors by looking in the masthead at the front of most magazines.
2. Take the time to speak at conferences. Conference chairpersons like nothing better than hearing from "real" users instead of the normal analyst or vendors. The only reason there are so few users on panels is that it is almost impossible to find them. Most conference list the session leaders – contact them as most will take users input.

3. Write about what you need. If you have a problem most editors will be glad to entertain a short piece or feature about the problem.

I know you may be afraid to talk – what will your management think if they read it. Don't worry; you present to management that you want to use the press to amplify your company's needs. When I was a network architect it was my strategy to use the press to help get vendor attention and it worked. Management understood what I was doing and supported it (as long as I kept it positive).

So stop complaining that no one listens to you. Become a user advocate.