

Crossware doesn't mince words

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CROSSWARE: It's software developer talk for programs that run across organisations' computer systems and connect to suppliers' and customers' set-ups. It also sounds like cross fire, which is where the Parnell, Auckland-based Lotus specialist doesn't mind being.

The company hit the headlines in October when sales and marketing chief Ken Fairgray fired a broadside at IBM. Fairgray, who says he has the blessing of owner Per Andersen to "make public comments", told Reseller News that IBM needs to take charge of its branding and not dump promotional duties on its resellers.

"In terms of convincing people to convert to Lotus, that's not something IBM should delegate to partners. It's too big a task and the credibility of IBM is important."

Refreshing talk in an industry in which channel partners are worried about hurting the egos of their 'masters'.

And in the style of a Don Brash pre-Waitangi Day speech, Fairgray got what political reporters call "traction" and the ear of IBM for his salvo.

So, despite the odd curt word, Fairgray says the 10-person firm, which deals in Lotus and IBM's other "knowledge management" software tools, is "unashamedly" a Big Blue shop.

"The business partner community in the IBM world will bitch and moan about IBM [but] it almost seems that IBM is doing the reverse of Microsoft, which is putting more pressure on the reseller to look after licensing and marketing.

"IBM is putting its money where its mouth is, in terms of financial assistance for partners undertaking projects."

This translates to annual marketing plans, pre-approved funds each quarter and "good technical support" for partners like Crossware.

"It's not that we don't want to work with Microsoft — we integrate with [their products] everyday. It's just that we don't like [their products]."

Owner Andersen has been a champion for the alternative-to-Microsoft cause since the expatriate Dane registered Crossware here in 1998, then known as Lighthouse Solutions.

He was used to a Lotus staff of nearly 100 in Copenhagen and got a shock when he landed in Auckland to find one Lotus employee. Equally, he was surprised by New Zealanders' devotion to Microsoft.

"The only thing I can put it down to is that local businesses, being small, often grew organically," Andersen says in the company newsletter. "By this I mean that they start in the garage or spare bedroom, and then expand with the same Microsoft applications that came free on their home computers. They just use it for email, word processing and maybe accounting — no database, no collaboration, no project planning and so on."

But nearly six years on, Crossware has a portfolio of customers that have taken to the likes of Lotus QuickPlace, Domino and Sametime software.

Law firm Bell Gully shares case notes with other legal minds; Montana Wines extracts the intellectual property of its brew; and Rotorua company Darma is tracking the testing of road paint. Other Crossware sites include Avanti bike maker Sheppard Industries, Ernst and Young, Nissan, Hella and Auckland City's theatres manager, The Edge.

Fairgray says the standard of IBM business partners has improved, which helps Crossware to win customers like the ones mentioned.

“A client said to me it used to be difficult to get Lotus Notes work done because there were too few firms, and [they were] charging a premium. They would get away with their low levels of professionalism. Now pricing is more realistic and there is more choice.”

The next choice for Crossware is whether to open operations overseas, from where it makes 30% of its sales. But Fairgray is cautious.

“We’ve all seen too many New Zealand IT companies branch offshore too soon. You can only do a delivery that is 50% larger than your last delivery.”

In the meantime, the folk at Crossware will continue the Lotus crusade, while keeping one eye on their master.