

# That never-ending quest for free goodies

**F**ree. Is there a sweeter word in the English language? And is there any better way to entice computer industry people to attend an event?

This observation was hammered home to me last week, when I attended the Windows 2000 User Group Tour, a free Microsoft event (hosted by VANTUG, the Vancouver NT Users Group) promoting the launch of Windows 2000.

The room was crowded with more than 800 computer industry types from the Lower Mainland. Why were we all so eager to spend a Thursday evening listening to Microsoft hype? Simple: we were promised free stuff.

The quest for free stuff start-

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N-GEN

**If you want to attract a high-tech crowd, and keep it captive for a product demo, you'd better give away those coveted loot bags.**

ed with the confirmation e-mail. "We have 900 attendees registered," it read, "and unfortunately Microsoft was only able to ship us about 800 to 850 goodie bags . . . so, if you want one-it is recommended that you arrive early."

Goodie bags? It set my heart racing (perhaps a remnant of



my childhood birthday-party-going when the best of them ended with the presentation of the coveted bag full of loot).

My friend and I arrived an hour early — along with more than 800 other people, receiving the promised goodie bag as we walked through the door.

There was, however, a dis-

tinct lack of goodies, just a few brochures and an evaluation sheet to fill out at the end of the event. Worse yet, the man sitting behind us had a free Compaq CD in his bag.

**Rule #1:** Computer industry people love free CDs.

"How did you get that?" my friend cried. He shrugged with the nonchalance of a man who has acquired free stuff that others have not. "It was just in my bag."

We were outraged. It didn't matter that we couldn't actually use the CD, as neither of us own Compaq hardware. It also didn't matter that both of us have dozens of unused free CDs at home, currently dou-

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# Give out the free stuff last

**High-tech workers are just like anybody else. They're attracted by giveaways.**

bling as drink coasters; it was the injustice that enraged us.

My friend flagged down a passing volunteer.

"Why did he get a Compaq CD and we didn't?" she asked. "There weren't enough for everyone, so they were put into randomly selected bags," the volunteer explained. Blatant inequality.

**Rule #2:** When giving away goodie bags, make sure they all contain the same goodies. Evidently, others in the audience were feeling the same way. A general grumbling arose.

The organizers of the event seemed to sense this discontent. One of them announced that fabulous prizes, including a piece of Compaq hardware, would be given away at the end of the event. This quieted even the loudest grumblers.

**Rule #3:** Give out real prizes — not just T-shirts, backpacks, and mousepads.

The event itself was long and dull. It covered many of the features of Windows 2000, such as the importance of the active di-

rectory, the Microsoft management console, and improved plug-and-play capabilities. The audience, however, was most interested in asking how Windows 2000's enhanced security features would handle the installation of patches.

As one audience member put it: "You know that one month after Windows 2000 ships, Microsoft will release a patch for it."

Towards the end of the 2.5 hour spiel, we noticed people around us sneaking out and returning with their goodie bags bulging. The man next to us stuffed a Microsoft T-shirt into his bag as he sat down again.

"Where did you get that?" my friend asked, unabashed greed gleaming in her eyes.

"If you fill out the evaluation form, you get a free T-shirt," he explained.

**Rule #4:** Computer people will wear any T-shirt, as long as it's free.

That was enough to set us scrambling to find our evaluation forms and fill them out be-

fore the general masses caught wind of this giveaway. We filled out the forms in record time, raced to the back of the conference room, and received our freebies.

The white T-shirt proclaimed "Windows 2000: I saw it first" on the front and showed a map of the U.S.A. on the back. Stars dotted the map, showing the stops on the Windows 2000 tour. The two token Canadian stops were Vancouver and Toronto, though these stars were shown hovering just above the outline of the U.S.A., as if floating in white nothingness.

We clutched our free T-shirts proudly and returned to hear the end of the Microsoft spiel. We couldn't leave until they had given out every last one of those prizes.

**Rule #5:** Don't give the prizes out until the very end of the event, or else people will leave early. Finally, it was time to draw for the prizes. Each number drawn was met with groans, as the people who were "so close, just one number off" vocalised their disappointment.

The backpacks and T-shirts

went first, then the magazine subscriptions, then the Office 2000 and Encarta software, and finally the Compaq hardware. "It could be a server, it could be a hand-held" was the only description given of this mysterious hardware.

I didn't win it. Neither did my friend. We slipped out the side door, trying to avoid the crush of people who were only now discovering that free T-shirts were being given away at the back.

I was triumphant. I had a free T-shirt. True, I had several similar ones from similar events tucked in the back of my closet, but that wasn't the point.

And did I learn much about Windows 2000? Not really. I was too busy thinking about the Microsoft Direct Access event that I'm scheduled to attend on Nov. 1, and wondering if the T-shirts and prizes will be better.

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