

I CARUMBA!



“What’s in a name? That which we call a rose by any other name would smell as sweet.” ~ William Shakespeare, Romeo and Juliet.



“Make everything as simple as possible, but not simpler.” ~ Albert Einstein

The Prince of servers, formerly known as the iSeries, which was formerly known as the AS/400, has once again undergone a name change at the hands of IBM’s branding “experts”. Now dubbed the

System i5, this identity reboot is the latest in a series of re-branding efforts dating back to the machine’s initial release in 1988. Here, in the midrange of Big Bluesville, the only constant appears to be change. But is that a good thing?

Regardless of how long IBM’s marketing gurus continue to play ping-pong with midrange monikers, the AS/400 faithful (full disclosure: we’re card-carrying members) will continue to believe this platform is, in Shakespeare’s words, sweet.

But that doesn’t mean these frequent name changes are without consequence to those of us who bleed Blue. In fact, the “System i5” move has created quite a bit of confusion in the marketplace, which is ironic given that IBM’s brochure, pitches the System i5 this way:

“The System i5 family will help you simplify a complex IT environment to deliver improved business productivity for today’s On Demand Business.”

You read that right – simplicity is the System i5’s selling point. Go figure.

AS/Whatchamacallit?

At the turn of the century (seven short years ago), the IBM System i was universally known

as the AS/400. It was renamed as the eServer iSeries later in 2000 as part of IBM’s e-Server branding initiative. The transition of IBM’s server and storage brands to the “System” moniker in 2006, resulted in the iSeries being renamed as System i. New hardware based on the Power5 chip is now called System i5, and the newest release of OS/400 V5R4 has also been renamed to i5/OS. There you have it – the evolution of IBM’s midrange naming conventions in the 21st century.

Of course, not everyone is marching in lock-step with IBM’s marketing department. Lots of customers and ISVs are still referring to this platform as the iSeries or the AS/400. For that matter, many of the folks from IBM are still calling it the iSeries, too.

So what’s the logic behind a dynamic, highly regarded platform that changes its name more frequently than Britney Spears changes her marital status? Didn’t the New Coke debacle of the mid ‘80s teach corporate marketers a thing or two about the wisdom of leaving well enough alone?

Some analysts and IBM business partners claim this salvo of name changes isn’t just a marketing stunt to prime the sales pump with “new and improved” offerings, but rather part of a complex global branding strategy. We can all agree on the complex part, but we’ve yet to speak with anyone who didn’t come back with a deer-in-the-headlights look, any time they were asked to expand upon what that strategy – and, more importantly, its benefits – might



actually be. Even Deep Blue, the IBM super computer that defeated world chess champion Garry Kasparov, might be challenged to think through this number of moves.

Baggage Check

A couple of years ago, IBM's iSeries general manager stated that the company was getting lots of feedback from ISVs and business partners that the name OS/400 implied an older, outdated platform that was getting difficult to sell. The new iSeries name was an opportunity to refresh the image and leave behind the "baggage".

But is there now – or was there ever – a "green screen" cloud of antiquity hanging over the AS/400 platform's head? We don't think so. This box has always been best-of-breed, offering an integrated architecture coupled with legendary availability, high security, easy management, and mainframe-class technology. So, rather than relying on new acronyms, we'd like to offer IBM this bit 'o wisdom:

Stop changing the platform's name. Start selling the platform's strengths.

All Hail the Slash System

One of the best things about the AS/400-slash-iSeries-slash-System i5 solution (let's call it the Slash System for simplicity's sake) is its flexibility – a degree of flexibility that puts Cirque du Soleil gymnasts in Vegas to shame. It offers a

multi-platform operating environment that can SIMULTANEOUSLY run everything from OS/i5, Windows and Linux to WebSphere, Java, ported UNIX applications, and more.

Down on the server farm, it can run SMTP, POP, HTTP, DNS, DHCP and your legacy apps ALL ON ONE BOX. In the WinTel universe, you need one server for SMTP so that it doesn't affect performance on your HTTP server. You need another server to run DNS so that it doesn't affect your SMTP server. You need still another server to run HTTP so that it doesn't affect your legacy applications. What will prevent Windows' "blue screen of death" from disabling your system? You'll need to cluster your WinTel computers – which creates a "cluster" of a different kind. All of this is the alternative to the AS/400's all-in-one solution. Stop changing the platform's name. Start selling the platform's strengths.

The Slash System's integrated storage, database and e-business tools enable you to centrally manage your entire infrastructure – including Linux and Microsoft Windows workloads. You can run your Windows servers from your Slash System and easily modernize traditional apps using WebSphere products. Add a dynamic workload manager that automatically balances system performance across all operating environments, and you've got a system capable of selling itself, regardless of what it's called.

The More Things Change...

Maybe the biggest problem with IBM's approach is that IBM can't make up its mind what kind of platform the Slash System actually is. Is it a business system solution platform or an Internet server platform? The answer, of course, is yes and yes.

Maybe IBM's return to the "System" designation in the System i5 is useful in creating a unified brand approach that encompasses hardware, operating systems, virtualization, and middleware that can act as hosts, hubs, and infrastructure boxes? Maybe the latest name change effectively combats any perceptions that this platform is old or technically stale?

We can't say for sure. What we do know is that IBM has lost a lot of name recognition and brand goodwill in the process. If IBM could seamlessly convert the AS/400 from CISC to RISC (perhaps the biggest change in the system's history) without a name change, it stands to reason that new technologies ushered in with the iSeries and System i5 could be integrated in a similar fashion – without all of the confusion.

Take a cue from the Porsche 911 sports car. More than 40 years after its introduction, the 911 is still considered one of the world's premier – and most lusted after – automobiles. Its technology has been re-engineered countless times...yet its name has remained the same. Interestingly enough, Porsche Cars North America, the place where we cut our programming teeth, runs its business on the AS/400 platform.

If IBM's quest for simplicity in a complex IT environment is the catalyst behind the Slash System's evolution from AS/400 to iSeries and then System i5, then it seems they need to re-examine the whole idea of simplification. Existing AS/400 and iSeries users probably won't find this litany of names overly simple. Ditto new users who, in their search for i5 software and solutions, may have to dig deep in order to uncover the wealth of applications and tools available for the Slash System platform. (Note to vendors: make sure all three naming conventions are included in your website's meta data).

John R. Taylor and Ann I. Nygren are principals and co-owners of Key Consulting/Software (KCS), a computer consulting company with more than 15 years of experience in the gaming and hospitality industry. KCS provides IT professionals with expertise in systems analysis and applications, specializing in back-of-the-house and front-of-the-house solutions. Key Consulting can be reached at info@kcssoft.com.

