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# The wrong marketing for open source

by [Matt Asay](#)

Open-source advocates for years have waved the banners of "freedom" and "no vendor lock-in" to sell the value of open source. It hasn't worked. Chief information officers don't buy vague concepts. They buy high-quality software at a compelling price. To better market open-source software to the world, open-source advocates need to match their message to what CIOs actually want to buy.

This is the heart of [my argument](#) about open source winning out over free software. (See [Carlo Daffara's excellent response](#).) I wasn't really talking about licensing, but rather about ideological emphasis: a difference of degree, not direction, in terms of software preferences.

The problem I have with free-software advocates like Richard Stallman is that [they think freedom is the primary reason to use open-source software](#). It's not. Utility is.

After all, we're not talking about essential human rights here. We're talking about getting work done with software.

Over the past 10 years I and the companies with which I've worked have sold hundreds of millions of dollars in open-source software/services. Not once have I been asked about "freedom." For that matter, I've also never heard a customer gush about reduced vendor lock-in.

To the contrary, I've met with CIOs and CTOs who have [explicitly told me that this isn't a top consideration for them](#). Just last week, in fact, I moderated a panel at LinuxCon in which I asked senior IT executives from leading media companies if vendor lock-in is a primary motivation for using open source. Nope.

They have work to do. They want software that helps them get their work done and gets out of the way. That's what open source does.

For those of us who make a living selling services around open-source software, it's not enough to trumpet freedom. No one buys that. A CIO might intuitively know that open source and open standards [tend to ensure lower exit costs](#) (i.e., the cost of moving to an alternative vendor/software product), but her primary concern *today* is the need to squeeze more productivity out of a significantly lower IT budget.

If open-source vendors want to get her attention, they had better be pitching high value for low dollars, not freedom. Freedom is something that gets considered once the CIO has already recognized upfront cost savings in a fully operational IT project.

Even then, CIOs don't think of it as "freedom." They think of open source, [as The 451 Group's Matt Aslett suggests](#), as "flexibility, performance, and reliability." These are the long-term benefits that drive CIOs to invest in open source long term, but they start with short-term cost savings and a successful IT project.



(Credit: [Software Freedom Day Philippines](#))

Forrester is now projecting a 9.3 percent drop in U.S. IT spending in 2009, [according to ZDNet](#). Want to help a CIO? Find her a way to avoid the [reported](#) \$6.2 trillion in IT project failure [using open source](#), so that her more limited budget can still pay for the work she needs to get done.

This is [what Novell did](#) by helping The Burton Corporation shave 80 percent of its server costs by moving from Unix to Suse Linux Enterprise Server. That's real money. That's tangible. That's open source.

Don't sell her on "freedom" and [open source as "magic pixie dust."](#) Right now, she can't afford it. Freedom is something that she'll appreciate over time, and it will reveal itself in terms of additional development flexibility *and* lower budget requirements to get things done.

Sell the CIO on open source's value, in terms of cost and quality, [as Forrester reports](#). That's the marketing message she needs to hear right now.



Matt Asay brings a decade of in-the-trenches open-source business and legal experience to The Open Road, with an emphasis on emerging open-source business strategies and opportunities. Matt is vice president of business development at Alfresco, a company that develops open-source software for content management. He is a member of the CNET Blog Network and is not an employee of CNET. [Disclosure](#). You can follow Matt on [Twitter @mjasay](#).