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Let's Hear It for the Underdogs

by Danny R. Faight

EVERYONE LIKES TO ROOT FOR THE UNDERDOG, right? But if you go shopping for a test tool, whose offerings do you look at? I bet that you'll start with the big players, the ones with advertising budgets large enough to put their names in front of you everywhere you turn. After all, you want a company that will be around to support the tools, and you trust the judgment of the thousands of other people who helped give these big players the bulk of the market share.

But what about the underdogs? If you count everyone outside of the handful of top-recognized vendors as underdogs, the big dogs are outnumbered at least seven to one by the lesser-known vendors. Some of these underdogs are fairly large companies that are doing a considerable amount of advertising and have several tool offerings. Many of them are in the directory section of this issue. They just don't have the same universal name recognition and market share as the big dogs.

Of course the biggest underdog of them all is open-source tools. The resources for building open-source test tools comes from the volunteer efforts of the people who work on them and from companies who contribute to the betterment of the craft by releasing tools under an open-source license. There are only a few production-quality open-source test tools, but the body of test tools in this area is growing rapidly.

Underdogs offer some compelling advantages:

- **Lower Cost.** The underdogs are usually cheaper than their more popular counterparts, often significantly cheaper. With perpetual budget crunches, this is a factor we can't ignore.

- **Less Pretentiousness.** It drives me crazy when I look at a tool vendor's Web site, and I have to click on a link that says "Solutions" to see their tools. I usually find very little information about



what these vendors' tools actually do or what platforms are supported. With the underdogs, I'm much more likely to get the straight facts, and I might even get prices listed right on their Web pages. Give me facts, not "solutions."

- **Simple Designs.** Tools from the underdogs tend to have fewer features than the offerings from the big dogs. Some might say this is an example of "you get what you pay for." But I would say that simpler tools are easier to understand, easier to deploy, and require fewer hardware resources.

Once I worked with an organization that wanted to do test coverage analysis for an embedded product. They chose a large vendor and spent a pile of money in licenses and consulting fees to get the tool working in their environment. But they never got it working properly. I suggested a very small vendor who had a much simpler coverage tool that already supported embedded systems. That tool was running in short order.

I'll choose a tool that works over a feature-rich tool every time.

That's not to say that the big dogs haven't earned their reputation. There are also several reasons for choosing a big-name vendor:

- **Long-term support.** You want some level of long-term support for your tool. We assume that smaller companies are more likely to go out of business than larger, more established businesses. To mitigate this, you could try to get a source license for the tool or stick with open-source tools so you can arrange support resources yourself.

- **Integration.** Tools from the big dogs are more likely to be integrated with other tools. If you happen to be using tools that can talk to each other, it can make life easier. However, if your tools have easily programmable interfaces, you might be able to do some integration of your own.

- **Community support.** For popular tools, you're more likely to find other people who use the tool and can answer questions about it.

There is innovation going on at all levels. New features in commercial tools may eventually show up in cheaper or open-source tools. And competitive pressure from the underdogs will keep the big dogs on their toes. For example, it's probably hard to sell a commercial html link-checking tool now because a number of free link-checking tools are available. So commercial Web test tool vendors have added additional features to make their tools more desirable.

Whether you want an industrial-strength tool from an industry leader, a niche tool or cheaper tool from one of the underdogs, or an open-source tool that lets you tinker and costs nothing, the end result is that the pressures between these camps make them all better. Tool users at all levels are better off as a result. **{end}**

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