But I'm not a developer...how can I contribute to Open Source?

Dru Lavigne
EuroBSDCon 2004
Outline:

- Current state of affairs
- Assisting novice users
- Taking a closer look
- Practical contributions
- Missing frameworks
Scope of Presentation

- Focus on *BSD, but not limited to the BSD projects.
- Content can be applied to any Open Source project.
- Points raised should be considered at both the personal and community levels.
Current State of Affairs

- Effective process exists for managing contributions from developers and documenters.
- Users who don't program or write are often unsure how to best contribute.
- Frameworks are needed to support other areas of contribution.
Points to Keep in Mind

• The success of any project isn't necessarily driven by technical merit.
• Projects are populated by people of varying abilities--"soft skills" are important.
• A successful community provides mechanisms which allow any member to make a worthwhile contribution.
Novice Users

- Are still struggling with that initial learning curve.
- Their enthusiasm over new discoveries often contrasts with the “old hat” mentality of the rest of the community.
- Many feel intimidated and too inexperienced to contribute.
As a Novice User...

- **Become aware of the available resources:**
  - Mailing lists, IRC channels
  - Documentation, how-tos and FAQs
  - A test system
  - Quality books
  - A local user group!
As a Novice User...

• **Don't be afraid to use resources:**
  
  ➔ However, do yourself and others a big favour by researching for answers before you post a question.
  
  ➔ Follow the posting rules for your chosen forum.
  
  ➔ If you don't understand the answer, politely ask for clarification.
As a Novice User...

- **Never underestimate the value of your perspective.**
  - You're not the only new user out there.
  - Not all documentation is user-friendly—post a clearer explanation as you find it.
  - When you do find clear documentation, take a moment to send an appreciative email to the author.
Assisting Novice Users...

- As your technical skills improve, don't forget what it was like to be a new user.
  - RTFM is not helpful; a concrete reference to appropriate documentation is.
  - Try not to let a bad or harried day result in a rude response.
Assisting Novice Users...

- It's not so much what you say as how you say it.
  - What you say in a public forum continues to have a ripple effect long after you've forgotten it.
  - Don't make others feel stupid for asking a question.
  - Steer others into their own explorations.
Taking a Closer Look...

- **Attitude has impact.**
  - Watch your own posts for negativity and fanaticism.
  - Take a step back if you find yourself constantly saying “this won't work” or “things will always be this way”.
Taking a Closer Look...

- Examine the prevalent atmosphere of your own community:
  - Are “outsiders” welcome?
  - Is there an obvious gender skew?
  - Is a blind eye turned to inappropriate remarks or discriminatory behaviour?
  - Do you actively participate or lurk in the woodwork?
Taking a Closer Look...

• **What are your project's goals?**
  
  ➔ Are users encouraged to maintain an all or nothing attitude?
  
  ➔ Are non-contributors denigrated or encouraged to participate?
  
  ➔ Is there an established framework in place to accept contributions?
Taking a Closer Look...

• Has your initial enthusiasm devolved into a general apathy?
  → Do you find bugs without reporting them or submitting a patch?
  → Do you scour the Internet to cobble together a solution, then not share the results so others don't have to reinvent the wheel?
Taking a Closer Look...

- **Will Open Source continue to get better if no one:**
  - Submits feedback and feature requests,
  - Files bugs or creates patches,
  - Donates money or hardware,
  - Provides missing documentation, examples, support, & advocacy?

- **NO!!!**
Taking a Closer Look...

- Pick a project and contribute!
  - Take a closer look at the 100s of Open Source applications running on your own systems.
  - Visit their homepages, Freshmeat or Sourceforge.
  - Literally 1000s of projects are in dire need of documentation, beta testers, and exposure.
What can I do?

- Do grammatical errors, undocumented switches and outdated manpages drive you batty?
  - Investigate the submission process of your project's documentation project.
  - Submit tutorials and how-tos online.
What can I do?

- Frustrated by the lack of documentation available in your native language?
  - Translators are a much needed resource.
  - If your community doesn't have a translation project, enquire about starting one.
  - Always obtain permission before translating existing documentation.
What can I do?

- Bugged that your place of work or school doesn't use Open Source?
  - Install what you can on the systems available to you.
  - Show others what they're missing.
  - Start an informal group which meets at lunch or after hours.
  - Carry a supply of give away CDs.
What can I do?

- Tired of reading bad press concerning Open Source?
  - Write opinion pieces and product reviews that highlight the positives of Open Source.
  - Give a talk at your local high school or college and demonstrate the benefits of being involved in Open Source.
What can I do?

• Would your dream job involve installing and testing software?
  ➔ Install CURRENT on a spare system and join the CURRENT mailing list.
  ➔ Find a project that is looking for beta testers.
  ➔ Install a port and document its features in a how-to.
What can I do?

- Are you an avid reader?
  - Most publishers offer free books to those who write and post reviews.
  - When you're finished with the book, donate it to your user group's lending library.
  - Have too many technical books? Start a revolving library.
What can I do?

• **Love to talk and help others?**
  - Find a forum, mailing list, or IRC channel and look for opportunities to assist new users.
  - Organize and/or volunteer at a local installfest: even if the venue isn't specifically about your project, see if you can obtain a booth.
What can I do?

- **Want to see Open Source promoted in business?**
  - Research and create a list of vendors in your area that support, use, or promote Open Source.
  - Find or create an organization that promotes Open Source in your community.
What can I do?

- Want to see more articles but feel your writing skills aren't up to par?
  - Some online magazines may still be interested in editing your submission.
  - Most online magazines are in dire need of HTML formatters and proofreaders.
What can I do?

- **Just don't have the time?**
  - Use your coffee money to buy a CD subscription for yourself and a friend.
  - Commit yourself to make a dent in a project's donation page.
  - Sponsor someone's admission fee to a conference.
Looking to the Future...

- A successful community encourages participation.
- Frameworks to organize contributions should naturally occur as needs are defined.
- Communities that only encourage technical proficiency suffer from a lack of non-technical contributions.
Looking to the Future...

- Consider the following non-technical frameworks:
  - Organized media campaign ensuring articles promoting a project are placed in magazines and e-zines.
  - Contacts within local government and business.
  - Lobby for funding and support of big name companies.
Looking to the Future...

- Committee to research benefits of standardization or Common Criteria certification.
- Committee to develop a standardized curricula and certification program.
- Organizing the creation and distribution of white papers and promotional material.
- Commissioning of usage surveys.
Conclusion

- Our ability to make contacts and to encourage others to contribute their talents directly affects the success of Open Source.
References...

- Resources for the Open Source advocate: http://www.theopensourceadvocate.org
- O'Reilly's User Group Program: http://ug.oreilly.com
- November issue of http://www.sdmagazine.com
- Bookcrossings: http://www.bookcrossings.com