DON'T FEED THE ALLIGATORS!

Talking with a friend a year or so ago about the effects of corporate greed on our culture, I was momentarily befuddled by his comment. "But we need those big corporations. Where would we be if Microsoft hadn't invented Windows?" Being a Mac user, it took me a minute. "Oh, you mean the graphic user interface instead of having to remember and type in all of the commands?" "Yes, of course."

Well, Microsoft didn't invent the graphic interface. The two guys that started Apple Computers did, making possible use of computers by real people. Microsoft only got away with heavy-handedly copying it.

Microsoft software is used on most computers. With more than 400 million users worldwide, Microsoft Office sales account for somewhere around $1 billion a year. That's a lot of money for a bunch of 99¢ CDs or downloads of a product virtually unchanged for many years, and with a lot of problems. Microsoft is now using the internet to slip piracy detection software into copies of MS-Office in people's PCs. Their existing licensing software was bad enough, totally scrambled our computers though our use was legit.

So some people decided it was time to change. They got together and developed a software program called OpenOffice, a fully-featured office suite that does virtually all MS Office can do. OpenOffice works on Mac or PC, and with Unix, Linux and other operating systems. It's available in over 65 languages. It does everything you need: word processing, spreadsheets, presentations and much more. It can even use MS-Office format files, so you don't need to re-type your work. And it's free! But you probably won't find it advertised or bundled by Microsoft.

What's more, it does things MS-Office does not, such as create pdf files to give to other people. And, unlike MS-Office, it is based on OpenDocument standards. For the first time, software users will be able to use their data in any compliant software package, both now and in the future.

Programmers around the world, with no money-making incentives whatsoever, are constantly fine tuning and building the program. This gives equal word processing, spread sheet and presentation software access to everyone in the world, regardless of how much they can pay. It's compatible with all other major office suites, the product is free to download, use and distribute. OpenOffice is built in the true spirit of the Internet; it is the great equalizer.

Already, OpenOffice has recorded 62,000,000 downloads worldwide. Cities of Prague, Berlin, Brussels, Birmingham, Munich, and Vienna have converted. Portland Public Schools has switched. Brazil's post office installed 46,000 copies, the French Gendarmerie, 80,000. The State of Indiana will deploy up to 300,000 computers with OpenOffice over the next few years, and the State of Massachusetts is changing to OpenDocuments by next Janaury. A poll indicated 86% of users would prefer to try OpenOffice rather than buy MS-Office 2003.

Studies have shown it is *ten times cheaper* to move to OpenOffice than to upgrade to MS-Office 2007. The French tax agency calculated that switching its 80,000 desktops to Office XP would have cost 150 times as much as switching to OpenOffice. With regular upgrades, it will save this amount every five years. With discs themselves less than $1 each in the U.S., the province of Ontario is able to equip its school computers for less than $10 per seat. In comparison, Microsoft Office XP Standard for Students and Teachers currently sells for $120 on Amazon.

So here's another example of people over profiteering, of a community caring about people all over the world, and working to make everyone's lives a success. Of people working together rather than continuing to feed money to a big business with a bad rep. And the value of sharing, and figuring out how to do something ten times as efficiently.

So how do *you* fit into making change, making things better? Maybe download a copy of OpenOffice, from OpenOffice.org. Try it. Let them know if there's some thing that could be better with it. If you like it, give them a donation. Cancel your order for MS Office. Cut this out of the paper and give it to the School District, or the County Commissioners, or take it to your city hall. Send a copy to the Governor.

Doing things better involves lots of little changes. But the big change is each of us deciding to start thinking about what could change, and starting to take action.

And you know what? It feels good!