

The Launch of ASUGNews.com: A Podcast with Thomas Wailgum and Courtney Bjorlin

"Thomas and Courtney dish on ASUGNews.com, their views on SAP in 2011, and field the kinds of questions they typically pose to others"

Podcast Interview Date: February 4, 2011

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Few events in the SAP space take me by total surprise. The launch of ASUGNews.com, with Thomas Wailgum and Courtney Bjorlin at the helm, was one of those rare exceptions, forcing me to set aside those "industry assumptions" and take a fresh look at a new player in the ecosystem. To get at the editorial motivations behind ASUGNews.com, I got on the phone with Tom and Courtney for this 24 minute podcast. My goals? To ask them a few questions that had been bugging me, to get a better handle on what they have in mind for the site, and to get their takes on SAP in 2011. If Tom and Courtney want ASUGNews.com to become the go-to independent news and analysis web site for SAP customers, they have their work cut out for them, but it's certainly a worthy challenge. This podcast documents their intentions at an early stage in this new venture.

This podcast has been added to the JonERP iTunes podcast feed.

Podcast Highlights

1:10 Tom and Courtney on their shared "Co-Editorial Director" job titles - a la McDermott and Snabe.

2:15 Jon: What drew you to this project? Tom: change is good - I felt like at CIO.com I had done everything I set out to do, when Bridgette called, it was the right call at the right time. There's so much going on with the ecosystem to write about and cover. When you consider the billions of dollars that are spent on SAP software each year and most of the fortune 1000 uses SAP, this is really critical stuff. Apple may get the lion's share of the coverage, but SAP is important stuff, and if these projects fail, it's a big deal. When I found out Courtney was going to do it, that was the clincher.

4:25 Courtney: the ASUG leadership drew me to this particular project. ASUG is solely dedicated to making SAP customers run better, and that's really in line with my coverage, where I try to look at the challenges customers are having and their successes as well.

6:20 Jon: what's the editorial philosophy of ASUG news.com? Tom: Our mission is very similar to CIO.com and TechTarget: independent voices, reporting the successes, and how people overcame the challenges, as Bridgette told, us, we are going to hold SAP to their promises, and we have been given free reign, we're not going to shy away from the kinds of stories we did before.

7:10 Jon: Who is the audience? Courtney: We put the site outside the ASUG firewall to reach the whole community - members, non-members, we'll be featuring ASUG members' stories but also broader coverage.

7:40 Jon: Looking a few years ahead - best case scenarios? Tom: I can see more multi-media, more revenue opportunities, there's a lot of ways we can grow the site - it can be as big as our former companies we worked for. Courtney: I really want it to be the go-to source of news for SAP customers and among the publications that set the agendas in the SAP space.

9:05 Jon: When the site launched, I was surprised not to see any customers blogging (I know a number of SAP customer who actively blog). Do you have plans to include customer blogs - why or why not? Tom: Right now we have a community corner space, and that's where we will reach out to customers and partners and get their voices out there, there were customers involved in the early prototype of the site, and ASUG members will be tapped as well, including several case studies we are working on now.

9:50 Jon: ASUG has taken some heat in the past for not being as vocal with SAP as some of the European user groups (Enterprise Support for example). Do you think that's a fair assessment and will this publication have an impact on that? Does it speak for ASUG or is your job simply to do independent SAP news reporting? Courtney: ASUGNews.com is not the vehicle for ASUG, it's strictly a news site much the way CIO.com is, we're not intending to speak for ASUG - we're just trying to augment the experience of community members and reach the broader ecosystem. ASUGNews.com is one of the initiatives that characterizes the bold vision that I believe this new leadership has for ASUG.

11:30 Jon: What do you think will be the biggest challenge to realizing your editorial visions? Tom: technical challenges will include Google search engine penetration...then we need to get influencers engaged - it's not like we've never written about SAP, we have a pretty good understanding of the environment, but getting influencers to come to our site and look to us for leadership and perspective is something we will need to accomplish.

12:40 Jon: So how do you stand out from the noise in this chaotic media environment? Courtney: it's not about how much you're writing - it's the quality not the quantity. You need to focus your stories around what does this mean to the customer. if you can't answer that question, you should be writing to begin with. That will be a major focus on our site and will help us stand out.

14:00 Jon: What's your take on SAP's market direction in 2011? Tom: I'm impressed by what Jim and Bill have done - they have done a pretty good job of changing the culture of SAP. What they really need to focus on is getting the value people are paying- you hear so much about shelfware, and millions of lines of code SAP users aren't using. Before you can get on with the innovation, you have to be getting proper value from the investments you're already made. That's a big thing for SAP to work on in 2011. Courtney: I'm fascinated by the new innovations, mobile, in-memory, cloud - but one of the areas that I really think is going to be important for increasing SAP's market share is honoring the investment of existing customers. In that respect, I don't think the importance of what SAP does with Solution Manager and how customers adopt that toolset can be underestimated. SAP has been quietly pushing this orchestration tagline - customers can't make all the additions to the foundation if the foundation is weak. SolMan is meant to lower the total cost of ownership to running this SAP, so that will be an important product set to watch this year. Tom: don't forget the real threat from NetSuite and Workdays and the like. How SAP handles ByD, that is a critical theme this year as well. There is a viable threat coming from the cloud vendors, so it will be real interesting to see how that plays out.

Jon: Sounds like we're talking about two different stories: getting the most out of your existing software and dealing with competitors - a case of divided attention? Tom: Yeah. In terms of ASUGNews, I'm more on the "extracting the value" and long term strategy side, and Courtney is more leaning towards the innovation, and that's some of the balance you'll see on our site. Courtney: we hope to balance the now and the future. You'll see a lot of content on core topics like upgrades and database migrations and SolMan and workflow, but we'll also pay attention to new horizons stuff and hopefully lend practical examples of mobile, in-memory and the private cloud, bring those down to earth.

18:50 Tom: we'll also cover things outside the SAP world, you can't just cover this in a vacuum - as we're talking to CIOs, there's a whole world of technology and how it's pulled together, so you'll see us cover other enterprise technologies.

19:50 Jon: In terms of SAP themes for 2011 - SME, mobile, in-memory and on-demand revenues aren't there yet, so we're in a wait and see mode - any standing out in terms of moving in right direction or needing help? Courtney: this in-memory database initiative is the most fascinating one they have going on and has the potential to generate the most revenue...we haven't seen a lot on the on-demand front, we've seen ByD but we've haven't seen any line of business apps from John Wookey's group yet, but we should see more by Sapphire. Customers are still confused on mobile stuff, it's not really SAP fault, that entire space is moving so quickly. Tom: when you talk with these long time on-premise customers, they don't want a lot to do with the cloud, at least from what I hear from those I talk to at events. I think it's going to be net new customers here, and that's going to be a challenge for SAP going outside its traditional customer base.

22:30 Tom: In terms of people to watch: Vishal Sikka - he may be over-exposed, but he's a dynamic person in the model of Hasso who knows his tech stuff but also his business strategy - and SAP's own CIO Oliver Bussmann - an interesting guy to speak with - he's doing a lot of great stuff running SAP on his own, those are some people we're doing to be watching.

23:20 Tom - may still take some of his traditional digs at Larry Ellison and the rest of the enterprise software industry.....

24:20 How do Tom and Courtney want to be contacted? Email, Twitter, blog comments....or set up a call....closing anti-Facebook discussion.