Technology

Big Year Ahead for Microsoft

By Gerald Fetty, President, Computer Networking Services, Inc.

During 2007, Microsoft will unleash a spate of dramatically new products into the marketplace. Which ones should your agency be aware of? More importantly, which ones, if any, should you use? Here's the latest.

Microsoft Vista

Vista, Microsoft's new operating system slated to replace Windows XP, is due out early in 2007. Like its predecessors, Vista holds out the promise of an easier user interface, more security performance and reliability. Historically, Microsoft has delivered on this promise as each of its new operating systems has gotten better, more secure and more reliable. But is this a product that agents will need to incorporate into their agency's technology right away? The simple answer is no. And the reason is simple.

Most agency management vendors have not begun testing their systems with the new operating system, and it will certainly be quite some time before most agency management systems are able to fully embrace the technology.

With tabbed browsing, you can have several websites open within a single instance of Internet Explorer 7.0.

Moving to Vista should be at the edge of the agency's technology radar screen, somewhere two to three years out. Having stated that, however, Vista should not be completely off your radar screen. Some management systems may surprise us with earlier adoption, especially the systems already built on Microsoft's .net platform.
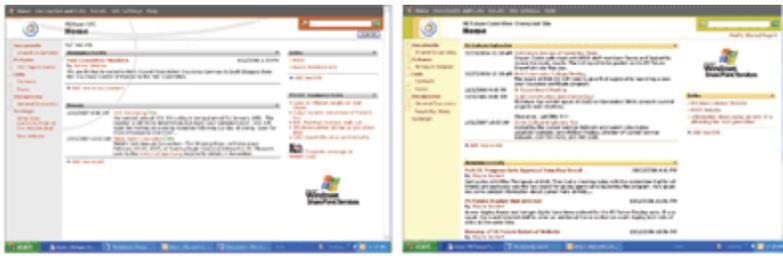Nonetheless, as you purchase any new PCs from now on, keep in mind that one day Vista may have to run on it, so make sure the hardware on any new system is fully compatible with Vista.

You should soon begin seeing computers with one of two Vista labels from Microsoft. One is "Windows Vista Capable PC," which, according to Microsoft, will enable it to run only core elements of Vista. The second designation is "Windows Vista Premium Ready PC." Machines with this designation (according to Microsoft) will be truly capable of performing and providing some of the new features of Vista.
Again, it's important to remember that, even though it most likely will be a couple of years before you have to run Vista in the agency, machines that can barely run it today will be on the "fleeting edge" tomorrow (see cover story). My advice is to purchase Vista Premium Ready PCs from now on. This will allow you to stretch your PC hardware a bit further.

IE 7.0

In anticipaton of the release of Vista, Microsoft has released the new version of its Internet Explorer. The first new browser release in about five years, Internet Explorer 7.0 will be available with Vista, but is also available for Windows XP.

The major focus for IE 7 is security. However, several other new features, most notably tabbed browsing, web searching right from the tool bar, and advanced printing options are included. Currently, if you want to view another website in Internet Explorer 6.0, you must overwrite the page you are viewing in your browser or start a completely new instance of Internet Explorer 6.0. For those who work on multiple websites simultaneously (most agencies do) this has been annoying, to have several copies of Internet Explorer open on your desktop. With tabbed browsing, you can open several websites within a single instance of Internet Explorer 7.0, then use the tabs to pick the window in which you would like to work.

Once IE 7 is in final production release, agencies should make sure their carriers' sites are compatible with it before moving everyone to it. I suggest using one workstation in the agency as a test unit first.

Several MAIA Committees Launch SharePoint Sites

Microsoft's SharePoint 2003 allows groups with multiple projects and activities to share documents and photos, arrange meetings and maintain a calendar of events. Agents can expect to see more use of SharePoint websites in the near future. Currently the MI Future Foundation and the Young Agents Council are communicating using this collaborative tool. ▪

Microsoft Office 2007

Office 2007 is currently in beta. As always, this new office product promises to offer greater ease-of-use, more security and more features.

With Office 2007, Microsoft has totally redesigned the interface and menu system. In Office 2007, you use "ribbons" to navigate and access commands. The interface is streamlined and will be easier to use. The downside, however, is that current users of Microsoft Office will feel lost when first presented with this new way of working with it. (I spent a fair amount of time just trying to figure out how to save.)
Ironically, users new to Microsoft Office will find it easier to adapt to than older versions.

Another significant change in Microsoft Office 2007 is the security enhancements. Microsoft has changed the way that the product uses macros. Unfortunately for agencies, most agency management systems integrate with Microsoft Office through the use of macros. This means that most agency management systems probably will not be compatible with Office 2007 for some time, so do not make plans to move to Office 2007 anytime soon.

Microsoft's SharePoint Services

SharePoint Services allow teams to create websites for information sharing and document collaboration, benefits that help increase individual and team productivity. It is a tool agencies should pay attention to and use today as it makes an excellent Intranet site.
The product has been out for several years, having first been included free with Microsoft Office and then with Windows 2003 server. The good news is that, if your agency has a Windows 2003 server in its system, then you already have Windows SharePoint Services. It allows your agency to easily create and maintain an Intranet site.
How is SharePoint an improvement over past Intranets? Too often Intranet sites in the past failed

to provide up-to-date information in agencies because the tech person in the agency was in charge of maintaining all the content of the site. Most of the time, however, maintaining the content was not the number one priority for him or her. Users of the site, frustrated because it lacked real value to them, stopped using it altogether.

SharePoint Services allows the administrator to distribute the responsibilities of maintaining and updating the content to several persons. SharePoint Services can also integrate directly into your active directory structure, which means that the system can authenticate users with the same credentials as the network logon, so that's one less password they'll have to remember or change.

It's fairly easy for any person with the correct security rights and access to maintain their portion of the site. So, for instance, a personal lines manager can be given rights to manage the information and content in the personal lines section of the site. The same can be done for commercial lines. This relieves the technical person in the agency from trying to maintain all the information on the site.

SharePoint Services also integrates directly with Microsoft Outlook, making it a very powerful collaboration tool for documents and calendars.

Microsoft has made it clear they will continue to invest very significant amounts of research and design into the Microsoft SharePoint Services product. I look forward to seeing many new enhancements and functionality being included in SharePoint Services in the new release of SharePoint 2007.

I'm sometimes asked about canned non-SharePoint Intranet sites marketed to agencies. These package solutions often are pretty bare bones Intranets and must be manually populated with an agency's data. I know of agencies that have purchased them, but never really used them due to lack of security, real features, flexibility, and cost of administration. These canned packages usually have what seems like a reasonable annual fee, but over time it adds up to a significant amount of money. For example, if a canned agency Intranet solution costs about $100 a month, over a three-year period that adds up to $3,600. That same investment would be better placed elsewhere, for example, towards a new server, toward the purchase of several new workstations or training.

Instant Messaging

More and more people are using instant messaging (IM) services to communicate. The problem with instant messengers for agencies is that they can be a productivity killer when agency personnel use them to communicate personal messages with people outside the office. Because of this, many agencies have banned the use of instant messaging use.

However, when used properly, instant messaging solutions do allow workers to communicate with coworkers or with customers. The problem is getting employees to use this form of communication for business purposes only.

Microsoft has a solution for this called Live Communications Server. In its basic form it is an instant messaging solution that can be locked down so that employees can use it to communicate only with each other. In its more advanced form, the live communications server can be connected to outside instant messaging services, allowing employees to communicate with customers and vendors.

As an independent agent, it's the relationship to your customer that's key. Using instant messenger with audio and video is one way to leverage technology, putting the human interaction back into the business.

Using instant messenger with audio and video is one way to leverage technology, putting the human interaction back into the business.

We have used Live Communications Service in our office for about a year now and find it very helpful. We do not use it for 100 percent of our communications, but find it another conduit that has its place. With the increase of Internet speeds and webcam technology, we find using IM for web conferences an invaluable way to get face time with someone, whether they're miles away at a remote office, or even in the next room.

Microsoft Exchange Server 2007

Microsoft released a 64-bit version of its Windows server operating system in early 2003. In early 2005, the Windows Server 2003 and 64-bit edition became generally available. Be aware that future versions of some Microsoft servers will be released in only 64-bit editions as Microsoft moves aggressively away from the 32-bit computing platform.

If you are not careful about server hardware purchased today, you may not be able to upgrade to the new version of your server OS. Specifically, the next version of Microsoft Exchange Server 2007 will only be able to run on 64-bit processors.

If you are looking at upgrading to Exchange 2007 in the future, your server hardware will need to be 64-bit in order to run the 64-bit edition of Windows Server and the new Exchange server product. An agency should keep this in mind. Your new server may be running Exchange 2003 currently, but in the near future you may want it to run Exchange 2007. ▪

Want to learn more?

- Windows Vista GetReady site:
  http://www.microsoft.com/windowsVista/getready/default.mspx
- Microsoft Internet Explore 7: http://www.microsoft.com/windows/ie/default.mspx
- Windows SharePoint Services:
  http://office.microsoft.com/en-us/FX011204871033.aspx
- Live Communications Server:
  http://office.microsoft.com/en-us/FX010908711033.aspx
- Microsoft Office 2007 preview site: http://www.microsoft.com/office/preview/default.mspx

Jerry Fetty is president and founder of Computer Networking Services, Inc. in Sterling Heights, Michigan, an endorsed MAIA technology service provider. He can be reached at Jerry.Fetty@SmartServices.com.