Microsoft Hardware

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O n June 18, Microsoft [introduced](#) Surface, a new family of tablet computers running Microsoft's forthcoming Windows 8 and Windows RT operating systems. The products will be available in a total of 4 different configurations, and integrate a number of innovations that haven't yet been seen on tablets (e.g. built-in kickstand, and a cover that doubles as a keyboard). But what makes the computers truly noteworthy are that they are Microsoft-branded.

This is the first time that Microsoft has sold computers under their own brand. Microsoft has historically been a dominant software company, and that dominance, at least in part, was driven by the fact that the company provided the software for many different hardware manufacturers, and didn't compete directly with them. With Surface, that has changed.

Who is Microsoft?

I don't ask that question facetiously. I know that every reader of Christian Computing knows who Microsoft is, but sometimes I wonder if Microsoft themselves know who they are.

In their boilerplate language included in each press release, Microsoft is very succinct

in describing themselves: "Founded in 1975, Microsoft (Nasdaq 'MSFT') is the worldwide leader in software, services and solutions that help people and businesses realize their full potential." Leading with "software" is totally appropriate since that is where the company got its start and where it still makes the bulk of it's money. According to the company's 2011 Annual Report, revenue was distributed across Microsoft's five business divisions:

- $19B for the Windows and Windows Live division
- $17B for the Server and Tools division
- $2.5B for the Online Services division
- $22B for the Microsoft Business division (including MS Office and related products)
- $9B for the Entertainment and Devices division

Of these five, the first four are heavily software centric, and the Windows division is completely dependent on other computer manufacturers to integrate Microsoft operating system software into their products. Microsoft has done a great job of making these manufacturers feel non-threatened and strongly supported in the marketplace. Will Surface change that?

Why would Microsoft compete with its customers?

Surface may be Microsoft's first computer, but it is not the company's first hardware product.

You may be using a Microsoft keyboard or mouse today, or perhaps you have an Xbox in your family room. Both of these are very solid hardware franchises. When Microsoft entered these hardware markets, they weren't threaten-

ing to their core customers – the Computer brands (HP, Dell, Acer, Toshiba). In both cases, Microsoft decided to launch a hardware product to demonstrate what was possible with Microsoft's software technology. In fact, the prototype Xbox was built using Dell hardware to demonstrate the gaming capabilities of Microsoft's DirectX technology. The prototype was so impressive that it became a very successful gaming platform. The first Microsoft Mouse was actually introduced in 1983, the same year the company introduced Windows, and before mice were broadly available for PCs. Later, Microsoft introduced additional mousing innovation, including the scroll wheel and the first commercially available optical mouse. A decade later, in 1994, the company introduced the first Microsoft Natural Keyboard, making an ergonomic option broadly available.

Microsoft has launched other hardware products that haven't enjoyed the longevity of these two franchises. Of course, you may remember the Zune media player that unsuccess-

fully attempted to compete with the iPod. Perhaps the shortest lived of any Microsoft product was the Kin, an underpowered Smartphone introduced in 2010 and pulled after just a couple of months. Microsoft's networking products stayed on the market for almost two years. Microsoft said they introduced 802.11b WiFi gear because what was on the market was too hard to use and was slowing market adoption, however, Microsoft couldn't keep up with technology advances in the WiFi space, so Microsoft discontinued the products in 2004. Perhaps Microsoft's most unique hardware products were the Actimates stuffed toys. Introduced in 1997 and discontinued in 2000, the toys were in the shape of popular kids characters including Barney, Arthur, and the Teletubbies. The characters actually interacted wirelessly with VHS videos and PC games.

In each of these cases, Microsoft was trying to shape or accelerate the market, demonstrating what was possible, and trying to create an ecosystem with Windows at its center. Over its history, Microsoft's greatest value creation has come from its strong support of independent software developers. Almost all of the above referenced products created new opportunities for software developers and sought to accelerate software market growth.

So, why did Microsoft introduce the Surface? They did it to accelerate the market for Windows 8 software

and to shape the overall tablet market towards the Windows ecosystem. I'm guessing that, given the strength of Android and the threat of Chrome, Microsoft didn't trust its traditional computer partners to be aggressive in introducing Windows 8 tablets that would generate excitement for consumers, and more importantly, for software developers.

Why should churches and ministries care?

I'm guessing most of us use Windows computers in our ministries. There are lots of advantages to the Windows environment. Hardware is a commodity, so we can buy it cheap. There's plenty of software, including lots of affordable or free options. Obviously, as the world becomes more mobile, a key question is whether Microsoft will be relevant. In theory at least, if we were using Microsoft-based smartphones and tablets, the integration of our computing platforms would be simpler and more complete.

Sounds great, so, where's the danger?

Microsoft is making a risky play. Their introduction of Surface could demonstrate the potential for Windows 8, generate huge excitement, and win the hearts of consumers and developers. If they are successful in doing so, I'm not sure they will continue to play in the tablet hardware space – they will have accomplished their mission and they can leave the computer business to the experts.

However, Surface could be just as well received as the Kin was (or rather wasn't). Meanwhile, Microsoft's competitive entry into the space could drive their traditional partners firmly into Google's arms. If that happens, those who bet on Surface could be left with an orphaned product line.

In 1 Corinthians 12, Paul wrote of the church "For the body does not consist of one member but of many. … God arranged the members in the body, each one of them, as he chose. If all were a single member, where would the body be? As it is, there are many parts, yet one body. The eye cannot say to the hand, 'I have no need of you,' nor again the head to the feet, 'I have no need of you.' " (1 Corinthians 12:14,18-21 ESV)

Perhaps Microsoft needs to be reminded that it has a specific role to play, and so do its manufacturing partners. By saying "I have no need of you" to HP, Dell, and Acer, it may actually hear back "we have no need of you Microsoft."

It is my hope and prayer that these articles on the power and danger of technology will encourage you in your daily walk with Christ. Whether it is the printing press, personal computers, the Internet, mobility, Wi-Fi, social networks, or tablet computers, new technologies continue to advance our ability to know God and to serve Him, wherever we go.

Russ McGuire is an executive for a Fortune 100 company and the founder/co-founder of three technology start-ups. His latest entrepreneurial venture is Hschooler.net (http://hschooler.net), a social network for Christian families (especially homeschoolers) which is being built and run by six homeschooled students under Russ' direction.