Windows Live Hotmail Hits the Streets

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After more than two years in development and testing by some 20 million beta testers globally, Microsoft will launch Windows Live Hotmail, the successor to MSN Hotmail, in 36 languages across the world May 7.

Windows Live Hotmail customers will also, later this month, be able to access their Hotmail e-mail and contacts for free, using Outlook 2003 or Outlook 2007, via the new Microsoft Office Outlook Connector beta that will be made available in 11 languages worldwide.

There will also be full contact, e-mail and e-mail folder synchronization between the two products.

In addition, Microsoft will introduce another e-mail client option for Windows Live Hotmail in coming weeks, known as Windows Live Mail beta.

This will be a free consumer e-mail client, and the successor to Outlook Express and Windows Mail on Windows Vista.

Windows Live is Microsoft's attempt to provide customers with a set of personal Internet services and software designed to bring together, in one place, all the relationships, information and interests people care about most.

"This is the most significant upgrade to Hotmail since its introduction in 1996 and represents an enormous improvement over the previous MSN

Hotmail offering," Kevin Doerr, general manager for Windows Live, told eWEEK in an interview.

At Mix 07, Microsoft's chief software architect, Ray Ozzie, shed more light on the company's software-plus-services strategy. Click here to read more.

"Windows Live Hotmail will deliver a safer, more powerful and productive e-mail experience than previous versions, with flexible access via the Web, on a mobile phone or with an e-mail client," Doerr said.

The beta testing process for the product involved 10 milestones of between two and three months, each of which involved a code ship and a period of tester feedback, followed by the evaluation and incorporation of that feedback into the product.

"This was a new model for us, and we were really pleased by the constant stream of feedback this process generated for us," he said.

As such, the team has decided to keep the product in beta beyond full release, where a percentage of the user base is, essentially, in perpetual beta. "This is a very good notion for a service. What the number is, I don't know. The distribution and the number have to be appropriately scaled and reflect the audience," Doerr said.

"So, while we are coming out of beta on May 7, work has already started on the next version," he said. "So a group of people will get the next build in another month or so, with new features and improved quality and performance, but which is not production quality. This is a direction in which we are headed with a lot of our products."

While Windows Live Hotmail has a new look and feel to it, the development team, responding to feedback from beta testers, decided to

offer users two ways in which to view the product: the classic version, which looks similar to MSN Hotmail, and the full version, which is richer, has advanced functionality and works more like Outlook.

"With 280 million customers, one product simply does not fit all. We believe that two is the right number. One is super-rich and for people who have the necessary bandwidth and processing power and want a more clientlike experience, and a second, which is closer to the old experience," Doerr said.

The hope is that, by offering both versions, the needs of as many customers as possible will be met. The classic version is geared toward customers who like the way the old MSN Hotmail looks and want a basic e-mail client without all the "bells and whistles," Windows Live Hotmail Program Manager Ellie Powers-Boyle told eWEEK.

The full version is geared toward those who want additional features and functionality, and includes right-click and drag-and-drop capabilities, preview pane customization, and auto-complete addressing, she said.

Another service, Windows Live Messenger presence, is also built into the product, enabling customers to see if their Messenger contacts are online right from their in-box. If they are, a conversation can be initiated directly with that contact.

While the free service is powered by advertisements, Microsoft listened to tester feedback during the beta process and removed the skyscraper ad that ran down the right of the screen, Richard Sim, senior product manager for Windows Live Hotmail, told eWEEK.

"Some testers complained strongly about the effect that ad had on screen real estate and told us it felt like they were looking at their mailbox through a keyhole," Sim said. "So, in spite of the financial repercussions

to us of removing that ad, we did so, and users will now see just one ad across the top of the page, he said, noting that the ad-free paid service will also continue to be available.

E-mail security remains a key concern for customers, so Windows Live Hotmail has been designed to prevent potentially harmful e-mail messages from making it into customer in-boxes, while also allowing users to make more informed decisions about the safety level of their e-mail, Doerr said.

"Some of the fundamental things we have done include introducing the safety bar in mail, which has had a great response from customers," he said. "While we try to block as much as possible at the entry point, some gray stuff will find its way into the box, so giving customers as much information and as many options as possible is key to dealing with that."

While all incoming messages will be subject to multiple safety checks, when they arrive in the Windows Live Hotmail in-box, the safety bar at the top of each e-mail message will give a visual cue of the status of the e-mail: white indicating that the e-mail is from a known sender, yellow that the e-mail is from an unknown sender and red that the e-mail is potentially fraudulent, Doerr said.

Hotmail users will also be able to automatically delete junk e-mail messages with just one click on the "mark as unsafe" link, block any future e-mail messages from that junk e-mail sender and report the junk e-mail sender to Microsoft's spam filters to help protect others.

Customers will be able to access their e-mail on Web-enabled mobile phones or PDAs, and, going forward, Windows Mobile customers will receive a richer online and offline Windows Live Hotmail experience with Windows Live for Windows Mobile, which will ship with Windows Mobile Version 6.

Microsoft is hoping that the look and feel of the new Hotmail and the security and feature enhancements it brings will be compelling enough to persuade most of its 280 million customers to upgrade to the new service.

The company has tried to make that experience as easy and seamless as possible. All users have to do is log into their existing account and click the green "Join Windows Live Hotmail" button. New users can sign up for a Windows Live Hotmail account here.

While the plan is not to force existing MSN Hotmail customers to upgrade right away, Sim admitted that customers eventually will have to upgrade.

"At some point it just will not make any sense to keep MSN Hotmail going. At that time there will then be an auto upgrade of those remaining MSN Hotmail users," he said.

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