With Windows 7 and new designs, PCs looking better

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(AP) -- Although no one waits in long lines for a new edition of Windows software anymore, the debut of Microsoft's latest operating system is part of why buying a PC is starting to feel fun for the first time in years.

Windows 7 is expected to work better than its predecessor, Vista. At the same time, Microsoft's marketing has gotten savvier and PC makers have followed Apple Inc.'s lead and improved hardware design. Windows computers suddenly seem a lot less utilitarian.

"If you line up the six or seven most interesting PC designs, people will say, `Wow. I didn't know all of that could be done with a PC,'" Microsoft CEO Steve Ballmer said in an interview.

[Windows 7](), which becomes available Thursday, is designed to look cleaner than Vista, streamlining the ways people can get to work, with fewer clicks and fewer annoying notifications. Setting up home networking to share photos and music won't require an advanced degree in information technology. Plugging in a new device won't set off a mad hunt online for driver software, which tells the equipment how to work with an operating system.

Making a version of Windows that people like, rather than tolerate, is critical for Microsoft. Most people don't choose Windows as much as they end up with it, because it's familiar and affordable. But it's conceivable Microsoft will have to work harder to win people over, thanks to a small but growing threat from Apple's Macs and a forthcoming PC operating system from Web search nemesis [Google]() Inc.

Vista fell flat because it didn't work with many existing programs and hardware. Microsoft fixed many of Vista's flaws but didn't spread the word, instead allowing Apple to attack with ads that pit a dorky office stiff (PC) against a casual creative type (Mac) and paint Vista PCs as unjustifiably complex.

It took a while, but Microsoft finally fired back. It hired Crispin Porter + Bogusky, a hip advertising firm, and set aside $300 million to portray Windows as warm and human. The "I'm a PC" campaign that emerged isn't universally well-liked, but the ads have arguably transformed the face of Windows from a pasty nerd to an adorable little girl named Kylie who e-mails pictures of her pet fish to her family without help from a grown-up.

Windows 7 also is arriving in the early days of a golden age for PC design.

For years, Apple has been making computers for people willing to pay a

premium for design: sleek, metal-encased laptops with brilliant screens; swanlike iMacs that stash the workings of the computer behind an enormous flat monitor, perched atop a minimalist base; the MacBook Air notebook, thin enough to fit in a manila envelope. Meanwhile, the most notable shifts in PCs have been from beige plastic to black, or from chunky square notebooks to ones with slightly rounded edges.

Now, PC makers are starting to experiment with size, shape and color at all price levels.

Netbooks, the tiny, inexpensive, low-powered laptops that have been the PC industry's saving grace through the recession, are no longer just shrunken corporate PCs. To entice people to slip them into a purse and carry them everywhere, netbooks are made in a rainbow of colors and array of textures. Microsoft stumbled by making Vista too lumbering to run on netbooks, but even premium versions of Windows 7 will work on the little devices.

Even mid-range notebooks, costing $500 to $800, now have enormous screens and custom covers. At the higher end, PC makers have adopted Apple's thin-and-light concept and etched patterns into sleek metal cases.

Windows 7 feeds into this design craze in part by adding deeper support for touch-screen controls, leading such PC makers as Dell Inc. and Hewlett-Packard Co. to add "multitouch" screens that respond to finger gestures.

The plummeting cost of memory and computing power make this shift possible. Now any computer is good enough to surf the Web and do most daily tasks, because nearly all have fast processors and massive hard drives. So instead of racing to provide the most gigahertz or gigabytes, PC makers are zeroing in on aesthetics.

"Design has come to be the distinguishing feature," said Jonathan Thayer, an industrial design professor at Pratt Institute in Brooklyn, N.Y. "Cost and quality are really not the variables that they were."

PC makers plan to unveil their latest in colorful and lightweight machines Thursday, an orchestration that was possible because Microsoft coordinated with PC makers earlier than usual.

This is "a very different Microsoft," said Alex Gruzen, an executive in Dell's consumer PC division. Gruzen said his team worked closely with Microsoft to fix things people didn't like about Vista - such as its slow boot-up time - rather than waiting, as in the past, for the software maker to "just throw the (operating system) over a fence" for Dell to install on PCs.

Part of Apple's success stems from having control over both hardware and software. By better aligning those components, Microsoft and computer makers could get some of the same benefits, and cooler PCs could squash Apple's gains. Apple now has 11 percent of the U.S. personal-computer market, up from 5 percent when Vista debuted, according to analysts at IDC.

Apple announced new iMacs this week but brushed off the suggestion that the timing was intended to steal some of Microsoft's thunder.

"Windows 7, from our point of view, is just another opportunity to remind everyone to switch to a Mac," said Apple Chief Operating Officer Tim Cook. "People are sick of all the headaches that go along with Windows."

Microsoft has more to contend with than computers running other operating systems. People have begun to use such gadgets as the iPhone as tiny mobile computers.

But Ballmer scorns the idea that smart phones could unseat PCs as the technology of choice for on-the-go consumers.

"Let's face it, the Internet was designed for the PC. The Internet is not designed for the iPhone," Ballmer said. "That's why they've got 75,000 applications - they're all trying to make the Internet look decent on the iPhone."

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