Review: Windows 7 strong, but don't pay to upgrade

October 14 2009, By PETER SVENSSON , AP Technology Writer

In this screen shot provided by Microsoft Corp., a look at Windows 7 is shown. (AP Photo/Microsoft Corp.)

(AP) -- Next week, Microsoft is releasing Windows 7, a slick, much improved operating system that should go a long way toward erasing the bad impression left by its previous effort, Vista.

If you've been holding off on buying a new computer, Windows 7 will be a good excuse to get back into the game. And if you've been weighing a Mac versus a Windows PC, then you should know that "7" makes Windows more attractive, though not a clear-cut choice for everyone. Windows is now easier to use and better looking than it was before, while maintaining its core advantage of cheaper, more diverse hardware.

However, most PC users should not take the release of Windows 7 as a call to action, or feel that they have to run out and buy the software for use on a computer they're planning on keeping. The upgrade will most likely not be worth the time or money, much less the effort of hosting a Windows 7 "launch party" as Microsoft suggests.

Windows 7 will come in several versions. The one aimed at U.S. consumers is Home Premium, which will cost $120 if bought as an upgrade to XP or Vista. You can buy it as a download or on a disc. Beginning on Oct. 22, it will come installed on new PCs.

Here are some of its highlights:

- The taskbar - the strip of icons usually found at the bottom of the screen - now does more than show which programs are running. You can also stick icons for your favorite programs on it, to launch them quickly. It's fast and convenient, combining the best features of the old Windows taskbar and Apple's Dock.

- File folders can now be organized into "libraries." You can have a photo library, for instance, that gives you quick access to pictures in folders spread out over your hard drive, or even several hard drives. This is great because many applications don't automatically put files into Microsoft's My Documents and My Photos folders, and tend to deposit content in their own folders. The new arrangement also makes for easy backups.

- Like Vista, Windows 7 will ask you twice if you really want to make changes to your settings or install programs, for the sake of security. But Windows 7 does it less often, and the prompts can be turned off.

- Windows 7 can sense if you use more than one finger on your touch pad or touch screen, allowing for neat tricks such as spreading your

fingers to zoom into a picture, just like on the iPhone. This is isn't revolutionary per se - computer manufacturers have bolted multitouch sensing on previous versions of Windows. But it does make it easier for them to include advanced touch capabilities, and many of them are planning to do so. That is what could really revolutionize how we use computers. I've tried laptops and desktops with touch screens, and found it nice to be able to directly tap links and buttons, bypassing the touch pad and mouse.

- For a lot of users, the step up to Windows 7 will also mark a transition to a 64-bit operating system. That means computers will now be able to use a lot more Random Access Memory, or RAM, for better performance in demanding applications such as video editing. Vista and XP came in 64-bit versions in addition to the regular 32-bit versions, but the XP version was never popular, and the Vista version became mainstream only last year. But 64 bits will be standard on Windows 7, installed on nearly all new computers.

Windows XP users have a lot more to gain by going to Windows 7. Vista introduced some great features, such as fast searches of the entire hard drive, that of course are present in 7 as well. Unfortunately, upgrading an existing PC from XP to 7 is not easy.

After upgrading, users will have to reinstall all their programs and find their files in the folder where Windows 7 tucks them away.

They may also have hardware problems. I found an old HP laser printer no longer worked with Windows 7. This isn't really Microsoft's fault or, specifically, a problem with the new operating system - HP just doesn't provide a 64-bit driver for that printer. A driver is a program that tells a piece of hardware how to work with an operating system.

If you do upgrade, I would still recommend tackling that transition head-

on by installing the 64-bit version of Windows 7, which doesn't cost more. Microsoft recommends a minimum of 2 gigabytes of RAM to run it.

If your computer runs Windows Vista, I think it's hard to justify spending $120 for an upgrade. The new features are nice but hardly must-haves. For daily e-mail and Web surfing, they won't make much of a difference. Vista was much maligned when it arrived in early 2007 for being slow, buggy and annoying. Now, it really isn't that bad, because updates have fixed a lot of the problems.

However, if you bought a Vista-based computer after June 25, you should be eligible for a free upgrade to Windows 7 from the manufacturer, and I suggest taking advantage of it. Your computer likely already is running 64-bit software, so there should be no problems with drivers, and the upgrade is much easier than one from XP. Windows 7 can keep your installed programs and your files in their old folders.

In weeks of testing the final version of Windows 7 on five computers, I encountered only one serious glitch. The backup function simply didn't work on one computer. The error message was obscure as always, and troubleshooting on Microsoft's Web site provided no solution. I ended up using third-party backup software. Given that regular backups are essential for a home computer, one can only hope that this will be an unusual problem that gets fixed promptly.

Another disappointment is that Windows 7 doesn't seem to improve boot-up times. In my tests, it took slightly longer to get going on Windows 7 than with XP or Vista on the same computer. I don't think this should be a major issue, though - instead of shutting your computer down, use "sleep mode" instead. This function has improved a lot since XP, and most computers take about 10 seconds to wake up.

4/5

Perhaps the most exciting thing about [Windows 7](#) is that it's inspiring computer manufacturers to try new things, and reviving old ideas like touch-enabled "tablet" PCs. It's breathing new life into the computer market. It just won't do much for old clunkers.

Citation: Review: Windows 7 strong, but don't pay to upgrade (2009, October 14) retrieved 26 April 2024 from https://phys.org/news/2009-10-windows-strong-dont.html