

Microsoft Store mirrors popular concept of its rival

December 4 2009, By Sharon Pian Chan

Blink an eye, and the Microsoft Store could be mistaken for an Apple Store.

The sign over the doorway has no letters, only a Windows logo instead of an Apple silhouette. Wood bar tables display desktops and laptops, and Zunes and Windows Mobile phones replace iPods and iPhones. The walls are painted stark white to showcase the products.

Where Apple store have customer-service areas called "Genius Bars," Microsoft's have "Answer Bars" at the back. Staff wear Apple-style shirts in primary hues. Staff members may even look familiar; some were recruited from Apple stores.

"I think it's pretty cool, but they kind of copied the Mac store," said Spencer Doan, 19, who was in the Mission Viejo, Calif., store recently playing checkers with a friend on a Microsoft Surface, a coffee-table touch-screen computer.

Opening retail stores is another move to make the software giant appear warmer and cuddlier. In October, Microsoft opened the first two -- in Scottsdale and Mission Viejo. The stores are a way to combat the perception Microsoft is uncool and user-hostile, an image that rival Apple has cannily crafted in its TV commercials.

To be fair, it's a game plan other technology retailers are cribbing. A redesigned T-Mobile USA store in Seattle also features the equivalent of

a Genius Bar.

Microsoft's new stores capped off a year in which the company finally started playing serious defense against Apple, to mixed results.

Last fall, Microsoft launched its "I'm a PC" ads, showing regular people bragging about their computer to counter Apple's popular commercials depicting Microsoft as a stodgy salaryman.

Microsoft also aired laptop-hunter ads attacking Apple's high prices, a message that reverberated in a consumer market shaken by an [economic downturn](#).

Microsoft still has 96 percent of the personal-computer market, but the company can improve against Apple, [CEO Steve Ballmer](#) said at a shareholder meeting this month in Bellevue, Wash.

On mobile phones, for instance, the company is losing share against the runaway success of Apple's iPhone, although Microsoft hopes the next version of Windows Mobile will be competitive.

A few shoppers at the Apple Store in Seattle's University Village last week could not wrap their heads around a Microsoft Store.

"I don't know what it would sell," said Jared Enger, 20, a PC user who recently checked out an iPod Touch at the Apple Store.

The Microsoft stores in Arizona and California carry software made by Microsoft, software that runs on Microsoft software and hardware that runs on Microsoft software -- computers, laptops, cellphones, Xboxes, Zune music players.

Shoppers can try out everything, just as in an Apple Store.

The stores also feature an Xbox video-game area where shoppers can try out games such as "DJ Hero" and "Madden NFL 10." The Scottsdale store, about 9,000 square feet, recently was offering \$100 to any customer who could beat a store employee at an Xbox game.

Sandwiched between a Juicy Couture and Burberry boutique, the Microsoft Store there had about 30 customers milling about on a recent Sunday afternoon.

Microsoft store employees brag about one-ups on Apple. Instead of the light-up display walls Apple features, Microsoft has more than 100 LCD screens that run across the store walls.

The store hosts free workshops every day. If customers don't want to upgrade to Windows 7 at home, they can pay staff at the store \$39.99 to do it for them.

The computers purchased at the store also come without the extra free software that populates new computers bought at other outlets.

As with Apple's staff, the employees do not work on commission, so they have all the time to answer questions from customers who may end up buying nothing.

The staff members are arguably the friendliest, most helpful employees Microsoft has ever hired. The Mission Viejo door greeter looks, and dances around, like Ashlee Simpson.

Another employee, who until recently worked for the Army National Guard, extols the virtues of Windows 7, then catches himself and says, "I'm starting to sound like a salesman!"

Microsoft corporate staff is not commenting on its stores. Apple won't

return calls seeking comments.

"It's very hard for me to wrap my arms around it because what is going to differentiate it from other stores selling those same products" that run on Windows, said Jeff Green, a retail analyst in Mill Valley, Calif.

"As a way of marketing Windows 7, I thought it was brilliant."

Green predicts Microsoft will open more stores at a smaller size than the Scottsdale store to make them feel busier.

He doesn't think they'll match the presence Apple has built.

Apple now has 280 stores in 10 countries. The most recent opened this month on New York's Upper West Side featuring a glass arched roof and 200 employees on two stories.

On average, Green said the Apple stores make \$4,250 per square foot, far above the average of \$400 to \$500 for specialty retailers.

In fiscal 2009, 18 percent of Apple's sales came through its retail stores, or \$6.6 billion out of \$36.5 billion. The company originally opened their own stores because it felt other retailers were not doing a great sales job on their product.

Victor Bremson, of Seattle, who was recently browsing at the U Village Apple store, has bought six [Apple](#) computers from the store, and he loves the one-on-one weekly consulting, which costs \$100 a year.

"If I'm working on a project in Keynote, I will come in once a week," he said. "Tell me where (else) you can get consulting for \$100 a year."

He shrugged when asked whether he would go to a Microsoft Store if

one opened near him.

"We've been using Macs since the 1980s," he said. "[Microsoft](#) has been too late coming to the party."

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