

Windows washer: Meet Microsoft's antidote to Vista

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In this March 2, 2009 photo, Julie Larson-Green, Corporate Vice President for the Windows Experience at Microsoft Corp., poses in front of a wall showing the progression of the Windows start menu icons from Windows 95 through Windows Vista, at the company's headquarters in Redmond, Wash. The Windows Vista logo will also be used in the upcoming Windows 7. (AP Photo/Ted S. Warren)

(AP) -- Julie Larson-Green hopes you'll like Windows 7. If not, well, now you and a billion other people know whom to blame.

Microsoft Corp. is counting on Larson-Green, its head of "Windows Experience," to deliver an operating system that delights the world's PC users as much as its last effort, Vista, disappointed them. She's in charge of a wide swath of the system, from the way buttons and menus work to getting the software out in January as scheduled.

Given Microsoft's history, Larson-Green's plan seems downright revolutionary: Build an operating system that doesn't require people to take computer classes or master thick manuals.

"We want to reduce the amount of thinking about the software that they have to do, so that they can concentrate all their thinking on the task they're trying to get done," Larson-Green said in an interview.

[Microsoft](#) relies on Windows for half its profit, which helps fuel money-losing operations like the pursuit of [Google](#) Inc. online. Windows was still profitable after Vista's 2007 launch, but its poor reception dinged the software maker's reputation at a critical time. Vista was designed for powerful, pricier PCs just as nimble rivals like Google were releasing Web-based programs that could run on inexpensive computers. Microsoft appeared to be clinging to an endangered world order that spawned its operating system monopoly.

What's more, Vista's initial incompatibility with many existing programs and devices, and its pestering security warnings, exposed Microsoft to ridicule in Apple Inc. commercials that helped [Macintosh](#) computers gain [market share](#). Businesses didn't give up Windows, but many delayed upgrading to Vista.

Microsoft's executives have since distanced themselves from Vista, acknowledging its flaws. Now the company needs Windows 7 to widen that distance even more.

You probably don't know her name, but if you're using Office 2007, the sleeper hit of the Vista era, you're already familiar with Larson-Green's work. She was the one who banished the familiar system of menus on Word, Excel and other programs in favor of a new "ribbon" that shows different options at different times, depending on what a user is working on. It seemed risky, but it was grounded in mountains of data showing

how people used the software.

Focusing on real customers might seem obvious, but Microsoft's programs more often have reflected the will of techie insiders.

One reason is that Windows' dominance relies heavily on third-party software developers who keep churning out compelling new programs. To give those developers as many options as possible for reaching PC users, over the years Windows spawned confusingly redundant features. For example, you can tweak antivirus software settings by opening the program; by clicking on shortcuts from the desktop, task bar or "Start" menu; by responding to notifications that pop up uninvited from the bottom-right corner of the screen; or by poking around in a control panel.

Another bit of dysfunction stemmed from Microsoft's corporate structure. Windows employs thousands of people divided into groups that focus on search, security, networking, printing - the list goes on. With Vista and earlier versions, each group built the best solutions for its isolated goals. For example, two separate groups added similar-looking search boxes to Vista's control panels and its Start menu. Yet typing the same query into both boxes produced completely different results.

Larson-Green, a 16-year Microsoft veteran, grew up in tiny Maple Falls, Wash., about 100 miles north of the software maker's headquarters in Redmond. She waited tables to put herself through Western Washington University, then took a job in 1987 answering customer support calls at Aldus, a pioneering software company in Seattle.

During six years at Aldus, Larson-Green worked her way into software development and earned a master's in computer science on the side. But she credits her waitressing and customer-service work for making her good at her current job.

"The primary things that help you create a good user experience are empathy, and being able to put yourself in the place of people who are using the products," she said. "User interface is customer service for the computer."

Larson-Green, 47, is engaging and eager in person - to the point that in one interview, she couldn't keep from repeatedly interrupting her boss, Steven Sinofsky, as he sketched the history of Windows. But while giving product demos on stage, she lacks the showman's panache that a surprising number of Microsoft employees display. At a developer conference last year, she seemed nervous as she showed off Windows 7's new features.

Later, she explained that as a woman, she worried that honing the softer skills of marketing might prompt colleagues to take her less seriously as a technologist. Larson-Green has spent her Microsoft career working deeply on many Microsoft programs, including the Internet Explorer Web browser.

When she landed in the Office software group a few years ago, Larson-Green was dubious that much could be done to improve the software, which dominates the market for "productivity" programs.

"I felt like it had been that way for a long time, (and) everyone was pretty happy with it," she said.

Yet customers weren't quite as happy with Office as they might have thought.

For years Microsoft had tested software with focus groups and gathered comments and complaints from customers. But around the time Larson-Green joined the Office team, Microsoft was trying a more precise way of garnering feedback. By deploying special software - with user

permission - on computers running Office programs, Microsoft could track how people used their PCs day after day.

That helped explain one puzzle in Redmond: why Office users often asked Microsoft for features that were already in the software. The tracking data showed there were functions very few people had discovered deep in the menus and toolbars in Office.

More research and testing yielded a solution - the ribbon, which displayed different commands depending on what the PC user was doing. Then Larson-Green pushed Microsoft to get even more radical: to release Office 2007 without the hedge of a "classic mode" that would emulate the old look and feel for people who didn't like the changes.

It worked. Just as Vista was a magnet for complaints, Office 2007 won accolades from software critics and regular users. Larson-Green proved she had the stomach to challenge a Microsoft legacy. Her reward? The assignment to help fix Windows. When Sinofsky was tapped to lead the Windows division, replacing retiring Jim Allchin, Sinofsky drafted Larson-Green to come along, in a new position created for her.

"Some people are great at having ideas, and (have) no discipline. Some people are great at discipline, not much at ideas," Microsoft Chief Executive Steve Ballmer said in an interview. "She's got both of those genes."

Larson-Green's team began with centralized planning, in contrast with the old culture that let Windows subgroups set their own agendas. For example, in the past, different groups worked on home networking. One group decided how Windows would share files among multiple computers at home; another group figured out how to get shared printers up and running. As a result, the steps for networking PCs and printers were inconsistent - and harder for [PC users](#) to master.

As she did with Office, Larson-Green sought insights in a daunting mass of data.

Vista was the first version of Windows to include the remote-tracking [software](#) that had helped Microsoft hone Office, and nearly 11 million Vista users had let their PC activities be logged. Larson-Green's team also surveyed more than 250,000 people around the world and showed other users prototypes, some as simple as sketches on paper.

From these billions of data points emerged big ideas that got boiled down into eight design principles. Larson-Green had them printed on folded slips of paper as reminders for everyone in the group.

Many of the principles come back to Larson-Green mantras of "user in control." The team tried to build an operating system people could use without studying first, one that would let them get right to reading the news or sending e-mail without dragging them down a rabbit hole of settings and configurations. A system with manners, not one that constantly interrupts with bubbles, boxes and warnings that, data showed, people ignored or raced to close.

The Windows groups agreed in principle but old habits often reared up. Many Windows teams still wanted to be able to create alert bubbles for their functions.

"We've probably talked to every team in Windows about, 'No no no no, we don't want you to pop your notifications. Windows is not going to use these notifications to tell users things,'" said Linda Averett, a Windows user experience manager.

Larson-Green is already planning Windows 8, though her team continues to tweak the Windows 7 user interface. Signs point to a possible release months ahead of schedule, though Microsoft still says the official plan is

for January.

Microsoft's marketing machine will pore over piles of charts to decide whether [Windows 7](#) is a success. Larson-Green says her measure will be the conversations she overhears at Best Buy and comments posted by bloggers.

"I think people are going to like it," she said. Her voice rose a few notes when she added, "I hope so."

See also: Behind the scenes with Windows 7 --
www.physorg.com/news159372461.html

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