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Surface tablet: Microsoft almost got it right

By Ben Woods, 19 June 2012 17:45

ANALYSIS Now the world has had a chance to recover from Microsoft's unveiling of its Windows Surface tablets, it's time to take a quick look at their chances of success — or of failure.

Only last week I wrote about five factors that could make or break a Microsoft tablet [<http://www.zdnet.co.uk/news/mobile-devices/2012/06/15/five-factors-that-could-make-or-break-a-microsoft-tablet-40155397/>], looking ahead to Monday's announcement. At first glance, it looks like Microsoft had the same ideas as me — but perhaps it skipped the section on price.

Briefly, the tablet will come in two flavours [<http://www.zdnet.co.uk/news/mobile-devices/2012/06/19/photos-microsofts-surface-tablet-unveiled-40155413/>]: one running Windows RT on an Nvidia ARM chip, and the other running the full Windows 8 operating system on a third-generation Intel Core i5 CPU.

Surface for Windows RT [<http://www.zdnet.co.uk/blogs/zdnet-uk-first-take-10013312/microsoft-surface-tablet-first-take-10026422/>] will arrive first, to be followed approximately three months later by the full-fat Surface for Windows 8 Pro. So far, so good. But it's the things that Microsoft didn't really talk about that concern me. Like an actual arrival date, or pricing.



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Microsoft is late coming to the tablet party, but it brought an impressive present with its Windows Surface models. *Image credit: Josh Lowensohn/CNET News*

From the look of it, Microsoft has done well in designing its tardy response to the iPad. For one thing, it managed to get Surface RT to be slimmer — though not quite lighter — than an iPad. Plus, the Apple-esque cover with built-in keyboard and touchpad automatically powers down when not in use. Nice touch, even if it does look remarkably similar to the Smart Cover[<http://www.zdnet.co.uk/news/mobile-devices/2011/03/06/jobs-reveals-ipad-2s-smart-cover-40092032/>] for iPad.

In fact, aside from a few minor gripes — would using USB 3.0 rather than 2.0 really have pushed up the RT's price that much? — the hardware looks pretty impressive. Of course, if using it turns out to be less impressive, then it doesn't matter how sleek it looks: it will crash and burn.

Beyond the hardware

But let's put aside the bells, whistles, trinkets and shiny things.

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On stage, Steve Ballmer talked about the Surface giving "Windows 8 its own companion hardware innovation" and "hardware and software pushing each other". But few details of the software, or specific optimisations for the tablets, were actually presented. Oh, it will have a Windows 8 RT-optimised Netflix[<http://www.zdnet.co.uk/blogs/communication-breakdown-10000030/netflix-arrives-in-uk-and-ireland-10025158/>] app at launch though.

True, details of some features in Windows 8 Pro and Windows RT have already come out. But given that Windows president Steven Sinofsky said it was "important that we have the hardware fade to the background for this product", there could and should have been more bespoke features on display to get people on board — as IDC mobile device analyst Francisco Jeronimo noted.

"Despite some interesting hardware features, very little was said about the software, the user interface, the user experience and the ecosystem," Jeronimo told me.

"The main focus has been on the hardware and specs only. I was expecting to hear from Microsoft today about how the Surface delivers an integrated experience with the PC, what additional services or features are available and how the Microsoft ecosystem is growing to be a real alternative to the iPad and Android tablets," he added.

Price unknown

The other unknown is the price. Microsoft must do anything it can to keep the retail price down for any tablet it launches, and the fact we haven't been told this is worrying.

All we know right now is that the Pro version — clearly aimed at business users and the ultrabook sect[<http://www.zdnet.co.uk/news/mobile-devices/2012/06/11/ultrabook-vs-laptop-is-an-ultrabook-worth-500-more-40155355/>] — will be priced on a par with ultrabook-class PCs[<http://www.zdnet.co.uk/news/mobile-computers/2012/05/03/sony-vaio-t-series-ultrabooks-in-pictures-40155159/>]. Similarly, the sum of knowledge for the RT tablet is that it will cost the same as "comparable tablets based on ARM".

“Why devote so much effort to designing hardware and software, and then market the device in a way that means fewer people will buy it?”

That doesn't tell me much. Though it pains me to make the comparison, when was the last iPad or iPhone launch that didn't include pricing and release date details?

The Surface tablets don't have to be the cheapest of the cheap, as they provide more features, quality and value than budget Android alternatives. However, the price tag must be within the realms of decency, if Microsoft expects any kind of consumer support on the level of the iPad.

"What makes the iPad the most successful tablet on the market is the software, the applications and the added value that end users perceive from that. The reason why Android tablets need to be cheap is because they do not deliver as much when it comes to value," Jeronimo said. "Besides Apple, no other manufacturer has captured significant market share in this segment."

Surfacing the Surface

And that leads neatly to the last gripe — availability.

Microsoft is selling the Surface tablets online only in the UK, and not via Currys, PC World and the like. That massively limits its discoverability — if you want to buy it, you have to know it already exists. The same can't be said for buying a laptop or other tablet.

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It bears repeating: manufacturers have to make it easy for consumers to hand over their money. Why devote so much effort to designing hardware and software, and then market the device in a way that means fewer people will buy it?

Microsoft's retail approach will limit the impact of the Surface, even if it ends up placating Windows 8 and Windows RT partners building their own tablets.

Overall, I'm quietly hopeful for the Surface RT, though not so much for the Pro version — people are unlikely to want to pay around £900 for a tablet, enterprise targeted or not.

Wherever your tablet loyalties lie in the Microsoft, Apple or Google camp, Microsoft has undeniably brought a new approach to tablets to the table with the 'one OS to fit all' for its PCs and tablets alike.

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