



**Beauty is more than skin
deep—the real-world impact
of Microsoft Surface**



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Why Microsoft Surface matters

There is plenty of interest in the newly launched Microsoft Surface™ device, certainly in the EMC Consulting studio. While it's cumbersome in an un-housed state, it does have the "WOW!" factor, always evoking latent childhood memories of sensory and multi-touch interfaces, accelerated in modern films including "Bond" and "Minority Report".

The excitement around Microsoft Surface is palpable and its early application in retail and entertainment spaces, most notably hotels and casinos, is easy to grasp. However, the opportunity for experiences enabled by this kind of technology in an "always on" web of ubiquitous computing has far wider implications and potential opportunities. Imagining these opportunities takes the brightest thinking.

To unleash the Microsoft Surface's potential, we have to accept this truism: it's not just about a new device. Four characteristics of Microsoft Surface technology signal a real change to computing, potentially as significant as that of desktop publishing in the 1980s.

Microsoft Surface challenges the way we interact with content

The environment is blatantly rich and immediate. And if applications for Microsoft Surface are well designed, they should retain the inherently intuitive nature of the platform; you touch and move things. In interacting with Microsoft Surface, you work with the content. Of course, the key term here is 'if'. You don't point and click, you pick things up, place them, flick them, twiddle them. This isn't the vernacular of the graphical user interface—it's something new, much more akin to play than work. This will not only affect how we design for the Microsoft Surface but what we design, challenging the structure of content itself.

Complex concepts can be exploded, explored, directed, illustrated, and explained. Something like a help function can be truly contextualized—available where you want it, not several pages away through hypertext links. Almost paradoxically, some interactions can be more efficient: with things like configuration and adding to baskets becoming more literal manifestations of these age-old design problems. Not only could this mean better awareness and understanding of content, but potentially stickier brand experiences.

What does this mean for business?

Two things are striking: organizations need to better manage the constituent nature and structure of content and they need to understand the importance its metadata plays in changing the content experience so dramatically.

Microsoft Surface inspires greater opportunities for interacting together

Collaboration is one of those overused phrases that everyone accepts without necessarily exploring the meaning. Microsoft Surface challenges this. Why? First, it's genuinely multi-touch, and this means that more than one person can use it simultaneously. Moreover, it is multidirectional. There's no top or bottom—there are four sides. This means that people can stand around it and work together, face to face, side by side, or in clusters.

Beyond just passing a virtual menu, handing back a food order or folding a bad poker hand—although these simple applications shouldn't be underestimated—the impact of its collaboration capabilities will be significant.

Imagine a discussion around the selection of a complex product or service, where two or more people use conversation and expertise as well as content accessible via Microsoft Surface to make assessments and decisions—working together to explore and investigate the right outcome. Add to this that all the interactions and content can be tracked in real time for later access on the same device or elsewhere. Side-by-side comparisons and analysis can be truly 'virtual reality,' with products or metaphorical objects for those products being placed directly on the surface, triggering reactionary surfacing of media.

In practice, the much loved desktop metaphor, first polarized by Apple and much loved, takes another leap forward, converging physical with digital seamlessly at the fingertips of users. Sharing, swapping, showing, and passing are all interactions that have become practical realities.

What does this mean for business?

It means that self-service is not the only possible strategy to pursue in the landscape for digital interaction. People's perceptions count. Therefore, familiarity and trust could be a significant driver for brands in the near future as customers seek reassurance, honesty, and transparency.

How Microsoft Surface is experienced needs to be a design consideration too

Beyond some simple technical issues—around height, lighting, and network accessibility for example—the proximity of Microsoft Surface is critically important to its success and adoption. While attention may currently be on the applications that could be developed, thoughts quickly turn to where and how it will be used.

Yes, it's large. But more importantly, it's not just a large computer terminal, it's a new experience. This calls for greater collaboration in the design process. Few design firms can offer all the skills required to establish successful, purposeful, and effective interfaces of this nature. Without doubt, Microsoft Surface heralds a resurgence of the role of the interactive designer, who can conceive ideas and manipulate them, considering input and response—a designer who can emphasize with how things will feel or "seem" as much as how they are displayed. However, space, time, and participant skill all need to be considered in parallel to the application itself.

The Microsoft Surface device will be a destination point, even a focal point. The intent of the application may require groups to be able to gather around the device. The duration of interaction needs to be considered: Will they be casual bystanders or prolonged users? In the latter case, how will you accommodate them? Is privacy a prerequisite to creating the right environment for interaction, for example, to discuss private financial matters?

Spatial designers will need to work hand in hand with interactive designers and the business stakeholders to ensure that all the behavioral, social, and physical factors have been considered in any plan and design.

What does this mean for business?

You cannot simply commission traditional application development for Microsoft Surface and assume that it will work. Application development becomes multidimensional and organizations will need to design the experience holistically. The application development itself is relatively straightforward, but where and how it will be used needs to be carefully planned or it will fail.

Microsoft Surface is one point of interaction, but not necessarily the whole story

The wonderful thing about Microsoft Surface is that it almost commands being part of a bigger picture. Its inherent strength lies in its unique collaborative nature. It represents a meaningful touch point on a more complex journey. To truly capitalize on its potential, we need to consider how it fits into the flow of interaction, over time, location and devices.

People will bring things to the Microsoft Surface, be it something physical, such as an ID tag, or something intangible, like a question. They will leave with something, too, be it fresh information, a new insight, or even content itself. Their journey may have started, and could continue elsewhere.

To design effectively around Microsoft Surface we must understand the context and design the experience flow to and from it. This context design means much more than the look and feel of the interface. It encompasses the structure of content, the business processes, the data, the value, and the interface itself.

It is this flow, and Microsoft Surfaces role within it, that presents the greatest opportunity. Microsoft Surface is a key milestone in physical, human interfaces as a critical channel for consideration in total experience design. Now, more than ever, we need to consider the whole story, not just individual, silo'd chapters.

The implication is substantial. Now is the right time to not only take a top-down, bottom-up look at the experience of your brand. It is the right time to consider the total experience that customers expect and demand: greater transparency, more immediacy, and increased intimacy. For winners in a fast-changing world, brand considerations must include recognizing and structuring user experience flows, whatever interactive device they might use, will be the winners in a fast-changing world. Your business will have to change, your people, processes, or even the essence of a product or service regardless of the technology used.

Microsoft Surface is a wake-up call to business. It's time to rethink what you know, because the future isn't around the corner anymore. It has arrived.

Real-world context

Microsoft Surface undoubtedly intrigues and even inspires those who interact with it, but the question of how the platform can be applied to various business contexts remains.

As discussed, this isn't "the web on a new box" or a stand-alone interface. Applications on Microsoft Surface have to be designed within a multichannel, multi-device experience strategy. Each opportunity and user or customer journey has to be considered on its own merits; some may benefit from a Microsoft Surface application as a possible touch point, while others will not. But how can it be applied in different industry contexts?

In retail

Imagine the food-tasting stations in your local super market. There's often little or no real interaction or call to action, and the experience can be quickly forgotten. People may like something they taste, but it doesn't necessarily trigger a purchase response or command customer loyalty. Now let's consider the introduction of food choices with Microsoft Surface at the heart of the store experience. The content itself can be far richer. In addition to taste, the customer can be moving through recipes and menu recommendations, video and tasting notes. The customer could be given a numbered card with a call to action to a website. When they return home, they could access tasting notes, see recipes, and click to buy seamlessly.

The reverse might also be true. Customers could come to a wine-tasting station and place their tagged loyalty card onto the Microsoft Surface. This could activate all their tasting notes from an online site and help the demonstrator make more informed recommendations, based on ratings and individual taste.

This isn't science fiction. Companies like Tesco are already developing interfaces like these.

In financial services

Imagine meeting with your banker or financial advisor and being able to “experience” the benefit of different products and services by using advanced modeling tools. For example, understanding how a pension works can be complicated for some people and advisors often resort to drawing diagrams. An interactive description could be so much more comprehensive and memorable.

Of course, not all discussions lead to an immediate sale. Customers often want to consider or discuss what has been suggested with others. As the advisor and customer interact, they can save content and access it later through a different channel, for example, online.

The reverse is also true. An existing customer could assess his investment performance and see through diagrams how his portfolio is performing before making “on surface” comparisons and selecting alternative investment products.

In this instance the technology is only a small part of the equation in developing a successful interaction and relationship. The real potential is in “fit for customer” collaborative solutions, done in real time, over a period of time.

In energy

In the energy business, you need to know where all your resources are at any given time. What are your yields? What are your production facility outputs? Where is transportation? Expensive decisions, ones that need to be made collaboratively, are often held up as people try to get together and gain access to the right information sources. This is not a simple problem to overcome, but with Microsoft Surface, it’s possible to export volumes of critical data into a more natural, diagrammatic interface that can be simultaneously accessed across boundaries. When you need an interface that allows modeling and cross-referencing, seamless integration with back-end resource allocation and provisioning technologies, Microsoft Surface is the answer.

It might sound a bit “Minority Report” but data can be ‘useless’ unless you can work effectively with it and that’s what Microsoft Surface could mean in this context.

Every second matters and every detail counts in the down-stream energy market.

In telecommunications

Have you purchased a mobile phone recently? You may have been amazed at the array of service options, services, and phone features. Imagine a chat with a sales representative who can place two phones on a Microsoft Surface and show you direct comparisons, or two different service levels, in simple visual terms. What if you could place your phone on the Microsoft Surface and look at your usage and discuss recommendations for upgrades or different service packages?

It is not out of the realm of possibility that you will be able to configure phones with just the services that you really want. Downloading through an online store might inhibit some users, while a face-to-face experience could be what they need to take advantage of a technology customization capability like this. Another visit to the store becomes another opportunity to build loyalty with the brand.

Media and entertainment

A group of people sit across a bar table. They place their MP3 devices and phones on the Microsoft Surface. They start by showing each other photos of their recent travels, passing images around of a recent shared holiday gathering. Images are shuffled from one device to another so that each user can share and build their collections.

This is real life “side loading” from one device, through a collaborative experience, to another.

And of course, people won’t simply share images. They’ll want to distribute other forms of content—that new film or latest track. Current digital rights issues notwithstanding, people will be able to share, and there will be environments utilizing the Microsoft Surface platform to facilitate them. But what is the role of brands in this context? What part of this content or the experience itself do they own? How do they generate value from it? These are the questions that forward-thinking companies are currently answering, as they look to Surface to speed their growth and improve their customers’ total user experience.

Key considerations

So whether you choose to develop on your own or to find a partner like EMC® Consulting to help you accelerate your time to value with this exciting new technology, there are things that you need to keep in mind:

- Microsoft Surface isn't a table. It is part of an integrated experience and has to be 'designed in' as such. This means that you need to consider the total customer experience—'flow' and 'touchpoints.'
- Microsoft Surface is a platform, but Microsoft Surface needs people. Human factors have to be factored in. How will people work with this technology?
- Content needs to be accessible, portable, and structured in ways that enable its use across devices and channels—this is one of the key enterprise challenges.
- Traditional metaphors like pages and indices are all changing on Microsoft Surface—you won't be able to throw your website on it. Microsoft Surface demands a unique set of skills in those who design for it.
- Microsoft Surface is a spearhead technology that represents another significant step forward in computing. It's not a fad and shouldn't be ignored.
- Get used to trial and error and learning to fail. This is a new frontier and some things will work well, some less well. Take small incremental steps in innovations but take them quickly.
- You're not alone. Microsoft Surface needs to work. We often partner with Microsoft to find out how it can work for you.

About the author

Matthew Bagwell is a creative director at EMC Consulting. He leads the Interactive Media division and is responsible for planning and all aspects of design. Matt leads strategic projects, understanding that they are always about managing people as much as defining future systems, interfaces, or processes.

Matt's career includes a board-level role at Syzygy and an interactive brand management role at Imagination, where he developed award-winning projects for clients as varied as Virgin, Ford Motor Company, Sony Ericsson, and Guinness.

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