



Perceptions

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To accompany the release of its revolutionary Vista operating system Microsoft asked Smart Design to create a packaging structure that was as much of a departure from traditional software packaging as Vista would be from its predecessor.



Microsoft needed an icon. This lofty goal was accompanied by a long list of qualities that needed to be communicated by just the package alone. And although launching Vista was the reason for a new package, if successful, potentially every new piece of software sold by Microsoft would be using the design.

Unlike many other products on the shelves, software is intangible. Software packages deliver a promise that, at the time of purchase, cannot be touched, held, or felt. Added to that is the fact that high-tech products are no longer just about technology — they are about personal meaning. Human qualities such as inspiration, excitement, and personal empowerment are replacing difficult-to-decipher technical specifications.

Microsoft's package needed to express, as quickly and powerfully as possible, a myriad of attributes embodied in Vista such as "powerful", "authentic", and "inviting". Being one of the most anticipated software releases in recent times, it needed to communicate these qualities worldwide. How could these goals be accomplished?

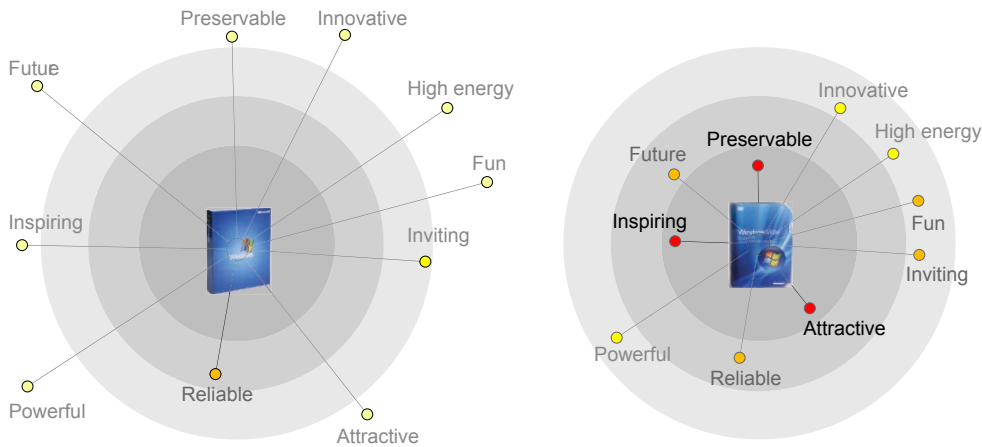
Our team at Smart Design relied on Emotional Mapping, a process developed by us to understand perceptions and emotions elicited when consumers confront a product or package for the first time and over the course of their whole experience. For many customers the first exposure to Vista would take place online or in print, so visual impact was critical.

While Vista has some innovative features, it would be difficult to make one of them the "star." The package itself needed to become a beacon for the future direction of Microsoft.

Emotional Mapping combines techniques in cognitive psychology, statistical methods, and information design to uncover "hidden" responses — emotional reactions and connotations that people would otherwise find difficult to articulate. Their responses are quantified, mapped, and statistically analyzed by the design team to gain an in-depth understanding of the things consumers are seeing and thinking. The team can then take these findings and turn them into actionable insights upon which to base the design.

In the process of doing our research we conducted interviews worldwide, in person and online.

Hundreds of potential customers in North America, Europe, and Asia were enlisted. Through this process we were able to develop a personality profile for each design concept and determine which would



[Figure 1]

Emotional Mapping provides the means to visualize and compare consumer perceptions. The shorter lines in the diagram above show that the new design better communicated all of the desired attributes. These results convinced Microsoft to implement the new design worldwide.

quickly communicate the desired attributes. We could also illustrate which attributes on our list actually had the most meaning to people, establishing a real-world hierarchy of corporate goals.

The standard cardboard box, used by Microsoft and almost every other software manufacturer, served as our benchmark. It was important for us to establish at the initiation of the project that a redesign would, in fact, present an opportunity.

Just a few weeks into the project a wide range of design concepts was presented to consumers in print and online. At this point in the project each concept was conceived, not as a final solution, but to reflect a point of view.

Of the potential package concepts shown to consumers, the cardboard box failed miserably when compared with the new concepts [Figure 1]. This clearly established an opportunity to better communicate through package design. We also found that some of our new concepts were able to convey “powerful”, “authentic”, “inviting”, and other desired qualities. In an instant we knew which of our concepts were communicating effectively, expediting the process and allowing the team to concentrate design efforts on the most promising directions.

The project was planned to enable rapid evolution. Over the course of the next few weeks, as concepts were refined and re-evaluated, an optimal answer evolved. This meant a

package that strongly conveyed the most important attributes.

Size was an important issue. We found that reducing the size of the package would have several benefits. Not only would the smaller format use less material, it would reduce shipping costs as more units would fit in a standard case. However it had implications. Retailers were consulted, since for them, shelf presence was a factor. The package needed to stand out. We convinced them that “presence” is not just a factor of size - the shape and materials used would easily be able to overcome any size-related shortcomings.

The resultant design successfully set expectations in the minds of consumers for the Vista operating system. However, we know that successful products need to exceed expectations. The package is the first step in Vista’s user experience. Once Vista was purchased and owners started using it for the first time, Vista needed to deliver on its promise.

Smart led Microsoft on a dramatic departure, creating a proprietary rounded form that recognizably set Vista apart and reflected Microsoft’s position as a visionary technology leader. Well received upon its introduction, the package has been applied beyond the Windows Vista line to many other software products.

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