

The Windows Vista Product Guide

by Tim Allison

The package brings “The Windows Vista Product Guide” and a DVD box containing two discs (Windows Vista Beta 2 32-bit (x86) and Windows Vista Beta 2 64-bit (x64)) plus an information card with a Windows Vista Product Key.

At the raffle where this book was offered, there were few takers and many perplexed, if not offended TNWoUsers, seeing this as the last item they would expect to see at a TNWoU (or any Mac user group) meeting, let alone a “prize” on the raffle table (overheard: “Shouldn’t that be a punishment rather than a prize?). As expected, there weren’t any other eager raffle winners anxious to snap this up; which seemed (to a geek like me) a shame because with the Intel Macs and Boot Camp, Parallels Desktop et al, this is something that a Mac user could actually use.

Since I already had Windows Vista Beta installed and running smoothly (under Parallels Desktop on a 2 GHz MacBook Pro with 2 GB RAM), I was interested in this book for two reasons: First, because I have already taken the training classes for Microsoft MCSE Certification (which I didn’t take the actual tests for), and have worked with Windows 2000 and XP enough to know that what is easily found and accomplished in Mac OS takes multiple steps and trips to many different menus and dialog boxes in the Microsoft universe; and Second, as I said, I already have Windows Vista Beta running but have been having a perplexing time trying to figure out exactly where things have been moved to or how things should be done (remember that this is Microsoft, and reading the documentation is always a good idea with Microsoft stuff—mind numbing though it may be).

So, I took this book, which originally included the Windows Vista Beta 2 CD. I didn’t take the CD, since I already had the software. I’m curious if anyone else took the CD and how he or she fared without this book in figuring things out. I suspect that for reasons I will go into later, that they

probably haven’t missed out on much.

I was skeptical in my approach to this book since it is the first time I’ve ever seen a book on beta software (and remember as Guy Kawasaki says, “Beta stands for ‘Beta than nothing!’”). The track record of Windows Vista’s development also has a trail of many features that were left on the cutting-room floor that never even made it into the first developer previews, so I wasn’t planning on this having much resemblance to what the final shipping version of Windows Vista would actually offer.



Cracking the Cover

As if to confirm my skepticism, the first thing the book says (in the typical legalese of a licensing agreement was a disclaimer that this book was not a “Product Specification” and that Microsoft reserves the right to add or remove features and change things from the “preliminary” version of the software described in the book. Thanks, but after five years of development (and how many versions of Mac OS X to crib features from?), you would think they would know by now what will or won’t be in the final version. As if to intentionally contradict themselves the opposite facing page to the disclaimer describes the book as

“a comprehensive overview of the innovative features and functions that make Microsoft® Windows Vista”.

The Table of Contents breaks the book out into 7 sections. The first two are the introduction and description of the multiple versions of Windows Vista that are planned for release. Section 3 is designated as being “For All Users” and gives an introduction to the general appearance (GUI) in Vista and the core programs included (like Internet Explorer. Section 4 is designated as being “For Home Users” although some

features, such as Windows Mail, Calendar and the Backup/Restore programs will probably be useful to smaller business users that don’t have a central Exchange Server or data backup system on their network. Section 5 gives a description of what Vista will offer “For Business Users”, while Section 6 will take a slightly different perspective looking at Vista as it relates to IS and IT professionals. Finally, Section 7 is the appendices and covers such topics as Windows Vista features that are available in Windows XP and the integration between Windows Vista and Office 2007.

Section 1 barely fills one page and is mostly marketing-speak talking about the

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“Confidence of the user experience” and how it will instill clarity and focus in end-user productivity.

Section 2 goes into painstaking detail about the different versions of Windows Vista that are planned. This may seem like a strange concept to Mac users, since we all use some flavor/version of Mac OS X and may even deal with Mac OS X Server, and that is all we can see the need for. Microsoft though has split Windows Vista into 5 distinct versions (Home Basic, Home Premium, Vista Ultimate, Vista Business and Vista Enterprise) to serve three “core” market segments (Consumer, Small Business and Medium/Large Business). A 6th version, Windows Vista Starter that is intended for other countries where (presumably) a more basic (and cheaper) version would be more viable, is mentioned almost as an afterthought. It goes on to give a brief explanation of the general features provided in each version as a way of helping pick which version someone would/should buy. Ironically, the first question most readers intent on upgrading to Vista, “Will my existing computer run Vista?” isn’t addressed until the very end of Section 6, the section addressing IT professionals; the group of people most likely to already know the hardware requirements from earlier press releases and advertising. Likewise, section 6 is the least likely section to be read by other users.

After that excruciating 14 pages of essay and charts/tables that confuse more than clarify which version we should buy, we finally get to the meat of the matter. Section 3 dives into a basic description of how the Computer Setup (for things like specifying your language, country and primary user account). The Welcome Center is next, and is where you do other first (and only once) time tasks such as setting up other user accounts, transferring files and settings from another computer (like OS X’s Migration Assistant) and establishing your Internet connection. While the rest of the chapter describes improved functions (such as the restyled/reorganized Start Menu, Windows

Explorer, Control Panel and searching and file organization) and new features such as the Aero interface (think translucent buttons) or Windows Flip and Flip 3D (think OS X’s *exposé*) or Gadgets (think OS X’s Dashboard), it doesn’t say exactly how to use these functions, how to customize things or install/manage the aforementioned gadgets. Although security is given a mammoth 11 pages of discussion, there is very little step-by-step on how to customize the security settings (does this mean you don’t ever need to?) or update the security for new threats and vulnerabilities. This generalized “What Vista does...” focus over “How Vista does...” continues throughout the book and will generally leave most early adopters (such as myself) craving more.

While section 4 does give more in-depth coverage of features mentioned in Section 3, such as the file transfer from another computer or the parental controls, the majority of the section covers what Vista offers in terms of photo, video and audio/multimedia creation and management. Windows Vista includes programs for editing and working with photos and movies, much like those in Apple’s *iLife* suite. Likewise, the Windows Mail (like Outlook), Calendar and Backup and Restore applications are comparable to Apple’s Mail, *iCal* and Apple Backup. It is convenient to have all these included with the Windows Vista (whereas Apple Backup requires a *.Mac* subscription). While all of these programs have new features, I suspect that most readers of this review (presumably Mac users considering using Windows Vista under Boot Camp, Parallels, etc.) will probably prefer to use Apple’s offerings, and so I won’t try to get too detailed in their feature sets.

Section 5 is the first section of the book that gets into features and functions that have little if any direct comparison on the Mac. Designated as covering Vista features for business users, the section starts with a comparison of Vista Business versus Vista Enterprise. Vista Business has advanced networking and backup/restore functions (compared to those in Vista Home Basic &

Premium) and functions that Mac OS X doesn’t offer, such as data synchronization (for Mobile PCs, etc.), a fax & scan center (yes, OS X does handle faxing, but it doesn’t have as full-featured of an implementation) and a Small Business Resource Center (which combines the aforementioned features with online Web portals and online software, training and support provided by Microsoft). XPS Documents is a digital document creation and viewing format that is Microsoft’s answer to Adobe’s PDF. Creating XPS documents will (by the book’s description) be comparable to printing to a PDF file in OS X. Although web browser plug-ins are promised for viewing XPS documents, it is uncertain at this point if there will be anything for creating/using XPS on the Mac or other platforms. Windows Meeting Space is a function without a comparable Mac solution that allows document collaboration and presentation over a network (even wireless or ad hoc wireless). According to the description, any Microsoft application’s document can be shared with Meeting Space so that, for example, a presenter can pass control to another user that can then make revisions to the presentation while it is still be shared from the original presenter’s computer. Basic file sharing works comparable to that in Mac OS, although there are more options for controlling what and how shared documents can be used or modified. Corporate Roaming is not necessarily a new feature either, and works similar to the NetBoot and Network mounted Home directory functions in OS X. Offline Files and Folders is a function that synchronizes files and folders between a server and a local computer so that the computer has a copy for use when not connected to the server (as in on a laptop), or when network bandwidth makes working on a server-based document impractical. Remote Access is comprised of two distinct functions: Remote Desktop, which is similar to using a Virtual Private Network (VPN) to access servers, printers, and other devices on an office network from home or while on the road; and Terminal Services Gateway allows users to access a program or

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service that is run from a server instead of the local computer (i.e. Being able to run a spreadsheet program like Excel from a server without needing to have Excel installed on your computer). This is an incorporation of Citrix-like features for those that are familiar with it.

Although Vista Enterprise is introduced in section 5, it doesn't get much attention until section 6. In this section, features that are designed to make network managers and administrators salivate are discussed. Things like unattended installation script files and customized installer images as well as improved system reliability, security and advanced networking features are listed almost to accommodate a checklist of what, while glossing over the how of Windows Vista in larger corporate and network environments. As mentioned earlier, the system hardware requirements for running Windows Vista are buried at the end of Section 6, a place that few will reach before falling asleep with the previous subjects.

The Appendices are in Section 7, which could also be labeled: What haven't we mentioned yet? First, is a discussion of "Windows Vista" features that are new and not available in Windows XP. This is basically a consolidated list of all the features that are mentioned in most of the previous

274+ pages. Conversely, a list of Windows XP "down-level" features is given. These features are mostly program updates such as Internet Explorer 7, Windows Media Player 11, and Windows Defender (anti-virus/spyware/malware program) that are not included in Windows XP, but which can be downloaded and installed onto Windows XP for newer functionality without the expense and hassle of upgrading to Vista.

The next two appendices cover how Office 2007 combined with Windows Vista will make life wonderful. As with the rest of the book, this was given in vague generalities using catchphrases like "empowering users" and "global collaboration with anytime/anywhere functionality". This constituted a mind-numbing 11 pages glowing about how Office 2007 in combination with Windows Vista will make you and/or your business successful. Unfortunately, there is very little about what actual features Office 2007 sports to make life wonderful. This is excusable because the book is a Windows Vista Product Guide, but out of 11 pages, they could have been more detailed.

The last appendix is on WinFX (a superset of the Microsoft .NET Framework APIs) and WPF (Windows Presentation Foundation). This section ostensibly would

be of interest only to programmers, but it (in keeping with the rest of the book) is short on explicit details and specifics, which will leave most readers numb and confused, while not satisfying the more technical readers needs either.

Conclusions:

At almost 300 pages, the Microsoft Windows Vista Product Guide is a hefty marketing brochure. The book goes to extraordinary lengths to "sell" readers on upgrading/purchasing Windows Vista, but doesn't provide sufficient technical detail for the technically savvy, who (as "early adopters") would be most likely to want/need a book on Windows Vista, especially as this book, released well before the official release of Windows Vista (and the onslaught of books that this release will undoubtedly start) is one of the first out of the starting gate. Conversely, those "typical users" that want to have some concrete instruction on how to use the features of Windows Vista will find this to be short in that regard as well.



Photos from the March eBay Bootcamp courtesy Ray DuCasse