

SPEAK

"By improving employee productivity, retailers can be more responsive to customer needs"

Brendan O'Meara, Microsoft



MICROSOFT TECHNOLOGY IN RETAIL, CONSUMER INDUSTRIES AND HOSPITALITY

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Getting beneath the surface of fashion

With technology playing an ever-increasing role in the fast-moving fashion world, innovative new systems that enhance the customer experience and increase retail sales are essential. That's why the recent unveiling of Microsoft Surface to more than 30,000 fashion and retail professionals was a major coup for both Microsoft and the UK clothing industry.

Showcased to fashion retailers at London's Graduate Fashion Week (GFW) in June this year, Microsoft Surface is a computing platform that responds to natural hand gestures and real-world objects, helping people interact in a simple and intuitive way. Microsoft partner Xface, working alongside network support business Lifeline IT, joined with the University for the Creative Arts (UCA) to showcase the technology. Rather than displaying collections in static 'look books', Surface was used by final year UCA students to present their work in an interactive forum.

Daniel Mitchell, founder and director of Lifeline IT, says: "The fashion industry moves at an incredibly fast pace, so technology that can help attract and retain customers is vital. We wanted to show the multiple uses of Surface in a fashion environment, so Graduate Fashion Week was the ideal place to do this. The key thing about Surface is that you have to interact with it to see how the concept works – by launching at GFW, we could demonstrate the benefits to thousands of people."

As part of the launch, Xface and Lifeline IT issued visitors with smart cards that could be placed on Surface to download the students' portfolios. The information, which is hosted in Microsoft Windows Azure, could then be retrieved after the event via a dedicated Web site developed using Microsoft Silverlight. As Alargarsamy Rajamannar, the managing director of Xface, explains, the successful integration of all these technologies is largely down to Xfolio – the core component that wires Microsoft Surface, Silverlight and Windows Azure. "Xfolio's main functionality in this project is to allow the updated content uploaded to Windows Azure to become available immediately to Microsoft Surface and Silverlight clients," he says. "It synchronises data in real-time mode using Windows Azure Services."

This functionality and Surface's ability to recognise objects and tags differentiates the solution from any other touch technology solution on the market. "Surface can recognise two types of tag – byte tags and identity tags. These are similar to bar codes in concept and can store a particular value, which can be retrieved by Surface's vision system. In the solution for UCA, we have used identity tags, which store 128 bits of data, so there is an effectively unlimited range of unique tag values," Rajamannar says. "These tags are easily printed onto plastic cards, which can then be placed on Surface and used to interact with and store data on."



Students from UCA were actively involved in the launch, using Surface as a promotional vehicle to display their collections to the GFW audience. Commenting on how the initiative has helped her, Hannah Wilkinson, a final year UCA student, says: "Having this technology to display our work has been revolutionary. No other exhibitors have used an interactive device like Surface, which has really set us apart from other establishments."

"Graduate Fashion Week is all about showcasing our work to potential retailers and fashion brands," adds fellow student Jessica Harris. "Contemporary technology

“Being able to use Surface to show the students’ final collections was ground-breaking for UCA. The interest was incredible”
Jules Findley, UCA



like Surface encouraged key industry figures to spend longer viewing and interacting with our collections, giving us a real head start on all the other students competing for the industry’s attention.”

A fun, social and exciting computing experience, Surface ensured the university stood out from the crowd at the busy event, as UCA’s Jules Findley, course leader for fashion, promotion and imaging, notes: “Being able to use Surface to show the students’ final collections was ground-breaking for UCA. The interest was incredible and the interactive nature of Surface meant key industry figures could

download information about the students’ work and take away an actual record of what they had seen.”

Discussing the potential role of the technology within the retail industry, Mitchell says: “Technology is becoming increasingly important in the competitive retail market. Companies are constantly looking for innovative ways to showcase product and interact with the consumer. Microsoft Surface brings a whole new dimension to the customer experience and, from the retailer’s perspective, it’s a very useful tool for loyalty schemes and attracting new shoppers.”

UCA

Solution: Interactive touch platform to showcase student work

Benefits: Interactive, appealing, multi-user experience, able to identify objects

Technologies: Microsoft Surface, Windows Presentation Foundation, Windows Azure

Partner: Xface and Lifeline IT

FEATURE MOBILITY

onboard cameras, combined with software such as Microsoft Tag and an Internet browser, enable the phone to decode tags and return Internet content. This can be used for everything from promotions to enhanced packaging and provides significant added value for customers.”

These technologies, in addition to the upcoming launch of Windows Phone 7 smartphones, means that Microsoft will have an end-to-end offering, making its mark in every aspect of the retail operation.

“Microsoft has long been a leader in mobile computing and is committed to making mobility a first-class computing citizen,” says Fridley. “And Microsoft continues to innovate with Windows 7-based tablet computers and the forthcoming Windows Phone 7 smartphones.”

In addition to Microsoft’s offering, its partners are providing solutions that can

create a differentiating experience for retailers too. Take Wincor Nixdorf, for example. Its solutions, which are built using Microsoft core technologies including .NET, include solutions for the retailer and customer alike.

“Better customer services are provided with the Mobile Sales Assistant, for example,” explains Nino Hörtrich, marketing director at the company. “Sales personal can use that device for mobile preregistration of goods. That saves customers’ waiting time at the checkout. Or it can help them to retrieve extra information about items to answer any customer questions. Another example for more flexibility is the Mobile Offline POS, which lets retailers move the point of sale outdoors or wherever their customers may be. The invaluable benefit of both these solutions is that your staff can give even better service to customers – inside or outside the store.”

Hörtrich continues: “The next step of increased customer services is the Personal Shopping Assistant (PSA). Customers use this mobile application to scan their goods themselves without the stress they often face at the checkout in the hectic process of placing items on the belt, having them scanned, paying and then removing the items back to the trolley. What’s more, this solution can also be an effective sales promotion platform. For instance, it can give targeted product information about items already preregistered in the cart and any linked items still on the shelves. Or, since PSA knows the shopping behaviour of customers from previous visits, it can point out items that they regularly buy but have not yet preregistered. Furthermore, customers’ personal mobile phones can be integrated. Customers can use them to read coupons, prepare shopping lists or



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