



## Digital Agency Expands Its Toolkit for Development and Business Advantages

### Overview

**Country or Region:** United States

**Industry:** Professional services

### Customer Profile

Mess Marketing is a digital marketing agency founded in 2005 and based in Chicago. It employs nine people and specializes in online and experiential projects for clients of all sizes.

### Business Situation

As a small agency, Mess Marketing wanted to use tools that would optimize its professionals' talents and deliver the best value to clients.

### Solution

As part of a campaign called "Mess with Silverlight," Mess Marketing is using Microsoft web and user-experience technologies to build a half-dozen new projects.

### Benefits

- Optimizing talent
- Delivering to clients faster and more cost-effectively
- Easing the burden of coding
- Strengthening competitiveness

"With Microsoft web and UX technologies, we can be more creative and productive, and deliver our clients a better product, faster."

*Rob Robinson, Creative Director, Mess Marketing*

Mess Marketing, a rapidly growing digital marketing agency headquartered in Chicago, has built its business on an unusually strong blend of creative and technical expertise. Wanting to further its success, Mess Marketing principals collaborated with Microsoft on a campaign to bring Microsoft web and user-experience (UX) technologies into an environment that was based heavily on Macintosh and Adobe Flash technologies. In using Microsoft web and UX technologies to create a number of imaginative and powerful web applications, Mess Marketing is enjoying a more efficient development environment, making the most of its professionals' talents, and reducing the time spent on a project from weeks to days. The agency also is able to deliver projects to clients sooner at potentially lower cost and is positioning itself more strongly against competitors.

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Jack Shedd, Interactive Director,  
Mess Marketing

## Situation

Since its founding in 2005, Mess Marketing has established itself as an up-and-rapidly-coming player in the digital marketing arena. Out of a shop based in the Wicker Park neighborhood of Chicago, the agency’s nine full-time employees use their creativity and technical know-how to craft engaging stories around a brand or campaign, and tell those stories through social-networking websites, live events, wall paintings, and even traditional print media.

According to Rob Robinson, Creative Director at Mess Marketing, what makes the agency successful in an increasingly competitive environment is its strength in both content and delivery. “Traditional advertising agencies might have a strong creative element, but their technology expertise, especially in social media, is often just an add-on,” Robinson says. “Emerging agencies that understand digital marketing may not grasp the importance of good storytelling and the imaginative design to go with it. At Mess Marketing, we do both. We tell good stories, and we implement them in a way that gives our clients outstanding results.”

For Mess Marketing, autonomy is another advantage of having expertise on both sides of the business, and one that makes the agency stand apart. “We come up with our own ideas and we execute our own ideas,” Robinson says. “This is unique for a shop as small as ours.”

The independence that comes from having a high level of control over their work also gives the professionals at Mess Marketing the flexibility to experiment with different ways of doing that work—and this is how the agency came to collaborate with Microsoft recently on a project and blog by the name of “Mess with Silverlight.”

As Jack Shedd, Interactive Director at Mess Marketing, explains, he and his colleagues had been evaluating Microsoft web and user-experience (UX) technologies because they were intrigued by the idea of running Microsoft Silverlight on the Macintosh, the predominant hardware environment at the agency, which also used Adobe Flash extensively. So when Microsoft approached them with the idea of deploying Silverlight and other Microsoft web and UX technologies and blogging about the experience, they welcomed the opportunity.

Shedd cites a two factors that motivated him and his colleagues to take part. “From what we had seen of the Microsoft .NET libraries for Silverlight, we considered them more dependable and better documented than their counterparts for Flash,” Shedd says. “We also felt that using Microsoft Expression Blend for user-interface design would be far preferable to the approach we had to take with Flash, which required us to pull individual components from a mock-up and rebuild them one at a time.”

## Solution

As part of the Mess with Silverlight campaign, and for other projects as well, Mess Marketing is using Microsoft Expression Blend 3, acquired through the Microsoft BizSpark program, which is designed to help accelerate the success of early-stage startups with software and support; Microsoft Silverlight 4; the Microsoft .NET Framework 4; the Microsoft Visual Studio 2008 development system; and the Microsoft Web Platform Installer on the following projects:

- A Silverlight-based widget that displays the agency’s latest tweet, designed to reside in the sidebar of a blog and released as a WordPress plug-in

“We were done with the [rssTunes enhancement] project in a total of four days—versus about two weeks that I suspect it would have taken using Flash.”

Jack Shedd, Interactive Director,  
Mess Marketing

- A Silverlight-based media player designed to be embedded in a blog, also released as a WordPress plug-in
- Bing-O!, a Silverlight-based application that pulls image-search results from the Bing search engine into a Bingo card (from the age-old game of chance) for any set of keywords
- rssTunes, an audio aggregator that provides a radio-player interface for music found on popular MP3 blogs and that is hosted on the Microsoft Web Platform, which includes Internet Information Services 7, the Windows Server 2008 operating system, and the Microsoft Web Platform Installer
- A social-media aggregator that pulls feeds from Twitter, Facebook, Flickr, and Last.fm

## Benefits

Mess Marketing has benefited in a number of ways from its participation in the Mess with Silverlight campaign and its use of the Microsoft web and UX technologies. Both creative and development professionals are working more efficiently and optimizing their respective talents, and the agency is delivering projects faster than it could before. As a result, the agency is better able to serve its customers and compete successfully.

### Making the Most of Talent

For Robinson, not everything has changed since he and his creative colleagues began using the Microsoft web technologies, but what has changed is for the better—much better. “We are still bringing Adobe-based mock-ups into our design environment, but in the Microsoft web and UX environment, it’s a far cleaner process,” he points out.

For example, instead of having to pull separate components from the mock-up file and rebuild them in Flash, developers simply import the entire file into Expression

Blend. “Once the file is imported, there’s a more flexible workflow back and forth between mock-up and design,” Robinson says. “For adding features, creative people can work directly in Expression, without having to ask developers to make the additions themselves.”

This means that whatever a given team member’s talent, he or she is using it most effectively. “With Microsoft web and UX technologies, we can be more creative and productive, and deliver our clients a better product, faster,” Robinson adds.

### Delivering Work Faster

With the Microsoft web and UX technologies, Mess Marketing development is streamlined at a number of levels, according to Shedd, who cites work with the rssTunes application as an example.

“Response to that application was so enthusiastic that we were motivated to come out with an updated version that incorporated the many suggestions we received from the community,” he explains. “Working with Microsoft web and UX technologies to create the second version of rssTunes made the experience vastly easier than it would have been had we been using Flash.”

Because the second version of rssTunes is so different from the first, developers working in Flash would have had to start from scratch. “In Flash, we would have had to pull up and rewrite audio and event code, but with the Microsoft technologies, we simply pulled a new XAML view and got the new code running in just a couple of hours,” Shedd explains. “Then, we added animation and transitions and completed the finishing touches, and we were done with the project in a total of four days—versus about two weeks that I suspect it would have taken using Flash.”

“Our experience [with the Microsoft Web and UX technologies] tells us we can not only get projects done sooner for our clients, but also afford to be more open to doing upgrades and enhancements.”

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Mess Marketing

For Shedd, much of the difference in the development effort between working in Flash and working in the Microsoft web and UX technologies comes down to buffering the audio feed. “The buffering that is built into Flash is complex and problematic, but in Silverlight it is so clean and works so well that you can specify buffering time in just a single line of code,” he explains.

Shedd goes on to say that with the Flash environment, he and his colleagues would have “dreaded” the work involved in building that second version of the rssTunes audio player. “But with the Microsoft tools, we were done before we knew it,” he says. “Our experience tells us we can not only get projects done sooner for our clients, but also afford to be more open to doing upgrades and enhancements.”

#### **Simplifying Coding**

Whatever kind of project Shedd and fellow Mess Marketing developers are tackling, one of the biggest productivity advantages of working with the Microsoft web and UX technologies comes when writing the C# and XAML code that underlies their web applications. For this, Shedd credits the Contextual AutoComplete Extender in Visual Studio.

“With Contextual AutoComplete, I can vastly simplify the work of wiring up events,” Shedd says. “Considering this is work I might be doing at least 50 times a day during coding, it makes a big difference in my overall productivity.”

Besides features and capabilities of the tools that are helping to make development more efficient, Shedd and his developer colleagues are taking advantage of the large development community surrounding the Microsoft web and UX technologies. “Whatever our question

about Expression or Silverlight or related tools, a simple search on the MSDN website usually answers it within minutes,” he says. “The availability of expertise is far and away better than anything out there for other products.”

#### **Positioning for a Competitive Environment**

Because working with the Microsoft web and UX technologies has made development so much more efficient at Mess Marketing, Robinson says the agency is better positioned competitively. “Even though we compete more heavily on ideas, price does play a role in that we have to justify what we want to do,” he says. “Because we can work so much more rapidly and easily with the Microsoft web and UX technologies, we can make our estimates and bids more competitive, pursuing a wider range of projects with large and small clients alike.”

Shedd and Robinson are careful to point out that their team will continue to use Flash for some projects, that the Microsoft web and UX technologies will not entirely replace that technology but rather augment it.

“For whatever the project, whatever the job, we like to use the tool that will give us the best result,” Shedd says. “In the past, we had only Flash, and many people believed that the Microsoft web and UX technologies just wouldn’t ‘fit’ in a Macintosh shop. Now we have these tools to work with, too, and we have the understanding of how well they work in a Macintosh environment and an appreciation of what they can do for us.”

## For More Information

For more information about Microsoft products and services, call the Microsoft Sales Information Center at (800) 426-9400. In Canada, call the Microsoft Canada Information Centre at (877) 568-2495. Customers in the United States and Canada who are deaf or hard-of-hearing can reach Microsoft text telephone (TTY/TDD) services at (800) 892-5234. Outside the 50 United States and Canada, please contact your local Microsoft subsidiary. To access information using the World Wide Web, go to:

[www.microsoft.com](http://www.microsoft.com)

For more information about Mess Marketing products and services, call (773) 698-6100 or visit the website at:

[www.thisismess.com](http://www.thisismess.com)

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### Software and Services

- Microsoft Expression Studio
  - Microsoft Expression Blend 3
- Microsoft Server Product Portfolio
  - Windows Server 2008
- Microsoft Visual Studio
  - Microsoft Visual Studio 2008 Professional Edition

### Technologies

- Internet Information Services 7
- Microsoft Expression Blend 3
- Microsoft .NET Framework 4
- Microsoft Silverlight 4
- Microsoft Web Platform Installer