An Interview With Dharmesh Mehta, Director of Product Management for Windows Live Instant Messenger

Hello, my name is Lon Safko, co-author of *The Social Media Bible*, published by John Wiley & Sons, the most comprehensive book ever written on the subject of Social Media. And today we are here with Dharmesh Mehta who is the Director of Product Management for *Windows Live, Instant Messaging*; and we're going to be talking about Social Networking and we're going to be talking about microblogging and messaging.

So, Dharmesh, please tell our listeners a little bit about who you are and what you do at Microsoft?

DM: Hi, Lon, and thanks for the intro. So as Lon said, I am Director of Product Management for *Windows Live* and I cover instant messaging and Social Networking businesses. So that covers everything from *Windows Live Messenger* to spaces and groups to our profile page, what's new, photo sharing…so it's really about all those real-time, as well as [01:01.9] sharing solutions that we have that span your PC as well as the web.

LS: Wow. That's a big mouthful. Can we talk specifically about *Windows Live Messenger?* The more research I do on this (and I've done quite a bit of it for the book) the more I am impressed. This is really an incredible product. Can you tell us more about this?

DM: *Windows Live Messenger* has been around about nine and a half years now. We originally launched it back in 1999 and it was pretty much focused on just being an IM solution. What you've seen over the years is, as we continue to grow, we've turned that from text chat and added voice and video. We then added photo sharing and games. We've added a ton of personal expressions so you can change your display pictures and record videos with your webcam. We allow you to have both those real time conversations, but also a synchronous off-line instant message. And today *Windows Live Messages* is actually used by more than 325 million people worldwide. So it's come a long way over the last nine and a half years and we hope to see that growth continue.

LS: That's absolutely amazing! I mean, 325 million is a really huge audience. It's not just IM from what I'm hearing. I mean, you can send files, you can send video, you can send photographs; and is this really just as easy as "drag-n-drop?"

DM: Yep. So you have your contacts in your Messenger's main window and you can start a chat with them; and it's not just about chat. You can share files, just drag them right into there.

Actually one of the latest things we've just added is a really rich photo sharing. If you drag photos in you can look at a set of photos with one of you buddies; or you can, at the same time, change what photo you are looking at while you're commenting and chatting about them. You can save them to Cloud and [02:47.3] have them permanently shared out where others can see them.

Again, you can share that just with your contacts or you can open it up to the whole internet.

LS: And again, that's one of the things that I find absolutely amazing. It's really you are taking the best of so many different Social Media tools, you've got the IM; you've got the photo sharing; you are actually combining it simultaneously so you can really get people on the same call and look at photographs and discuss them and save them, edit them…all at the same time?

DM: Yep, completely. That's actually….for a while people felt like, you know, you had to have a side-load photo-haring application, or this side-load IM-application, and their side-load email application. But really, you're people and you have one set of people you want to interact with, some you might want to do some things with, and some another set of things; but whether you're in IM or you're up on the web, or you're on your mobile phone, we want to make sure you can get your stuff. Whether that photos, or bios, or being able to have real-time chat; we want to bring that context to you wherever you happen to be.

LS: And there's another key word! I just finished writing the chapter on "mobile" and, again, I had absolutely no idea the impact that 'mobile' cellular phones are going to have on Social Networking and Social Media. And your technology is also available and compatible with mobile phones?

DM: Yes. So we offer a couple of different things on mobile phones. The first is for our PC users. When you're there chatting with someone and all of a sudden they go offline because they are no longer on their PC. The fact of the matter is many of those people are actually online on their phone and they can receive [04:19.8] alerts. So we have connections from the PC and the web messaging experiences straight to your phone. And that's the first one.

But the one that I'm more excited about and continues to be growing really rapidly is about the fact that when you are on your mobile phone you now actually have far more phones that are data-capable. And so whether that's "browse" services for IM-ing or photo haring; whether that's doing little microblogging and updating your status; or even on some of the higher-end phones, whether that's mobile or Blackberry or Nokia and actually having rich client application.

Obviously you have to design those slightly differently; the context is different.   There's different user experiences because of the fact that you're always reachable on your phone but you may not always want to be reachable. But it's actually really exciting what's happening on the mobile phone, and it's really two things. It's 1. Bringing the things that people have been doing on PC and the web and extending them to the phone. But then in some countries you just come online on the phone and you may never, ever get on a PC. They may never get download apps onto a Windows PC, but you want to make sure that you have as great a mobile experience that's served from their phone.

LS: And that's really exciting, too. That is that you do support mobile phone technology. In some previous interviews with Flickr and Amanda Vega, I learned that there's actually three cell phones for every human being on the planet right now.

DM: Yep!

LS: That's amazing! Also one of the things that I did not realize is that in Third World countries (because the country is not quite as affluent as Europe and the United States) a lot of people simple cannot afford PC's so their entire life and all of their communications or web browsing or email, everything has to be done on a cell phone. It's kind of their all-in-one technology.

DM: Yep, completely agree! And it's interesting that the different scenarios that you encounter in some of these countries, where your phone not only becomes SMS…and SMS on your phone not only becomes just a way to have short chats with people, but it's also a great way of getting little bits of information.

If you find a short SMS text message and you get the weather, you get your latest calendar appointment, or you do a web search. These are all things that are done slightly differently depending on the type of phone you have and the type user you are. Mobile is actually a real exciting space for us, just for the amount of growth and the amount of different possibilities that are coming.

LS: So that's pretty cool. So I'm sitting here working on my PC and I'm chatting with somebody, I'm looking at photos and then I have to leave to go to a meeting; I can actually just pick up the conversation from my cell phone while I'm driving in my car.

DM: Yep, continue it from your car and you can actually have those pictures there with you, too.

LS: That's absolutely terrific. I love that. Wow.

What's you typical demographic? Who is actually using Windows Live Messenger?

DM: On Windows Live Messenger today there is 325 million people who span the world, and so we are actually more of an international company than just being U.S. focused, like some of the other Instant Messaging companies, and in terms of demographic, it spans everyone. So it's all the way from young teens to even younger than that, all the way up to adults and seniors.

We recently did some reports looking specifically at a fast-growing demographic of the 70+ population that's starting to come online and wanting to chat with their grandkids and share photos and talk to them. And it's actually really interesting how IM, which once upon a time was really just restricted to, almost, college students and very young age ranges, really brought in all people on the planet.
It transected.

LS: (Laughter) yeah. And the two things I heard you mention is that you hear "older generation." And when we did the research for The Social Media Bible, what we found is that, you're absolutely right, the young kids who grew up on all this technology this is kind of second nature to them; but the Generation Y's and the Generation X's…they're with it but there more kind of "email-ish."

But when you actually get it into 50 and above, that people have a tendency to be a little apprehensive. But you're saying even retired people, grandparents, are using it. So it means that this is a really easy technology to get into.

DM: And I think….I completely agree with you that that first reaction, some of the older age ranges can be a little apprehensive, but I think some of the things we found work really well and really get people in is just some of the basics of, "Hey, we've got a webcam and we can now have a web chat; and although I live on the other side of the country I can have a real interaction with my kids and grandkids. I can share photos with them and I can have a photo frame that's constantly sinking pictures with the Cloud and pulling down the latest things that my grandkids are publishing from their mobile phones."

Some of those scenarios that really sell some of the folks that have been a little more apprehensive about technology.

LS: Yeah, and the fact that it's easy….

DM: You've got to make it easy. (Laughter)

LS: Yeah, you really do! And the other thing that I'm excited to hear you say is that too often when we talk about Social Media and technology, we just look at U.S.-centric. Like we're the center of the world, when in fact, there's the whole rest of the world out there. And what you're saying is there is 325 million dispersed throughout the entire planet!

DM: Yep. And I say more than 85% of those are actually outside the U.S. It's an interesting trend that you talked about. You know, often sitting here in the U.S. we get very U.S. focused and we often think that a lot of technology starts here in the U.S. and spreads to other parts of the world. But going back to that discussion that we had on mobile, some of the most interesting things in mobile are actually happening in Asia; whether that's Japan and South Korea or in India and China, where users are coming online on mobile and may never use a PC.

Think of this from a global perspective we're learning and discovering from other players, other competitors, and companies, just around the world.

LS: Wow! So because this is really such a simple technology, there really isn't any language barriers here.

DM: Nope! So we support over 55 different languages in a variety of different countries with different dialects, and it's actually one of the great things that we can do here at Microsoft, just because we're use to this. We're a global company and we know how to localize and not just localize from a language perspective, but it's also the experience. So what Instant Messaging looks like here in the U.S. might be very different than what a Korean user or a French user wants to see.

For instance, in France you look at a lot of our Instant Messaging experiences and there's far more media and content in there. And so it's about video sharing and it's about keeping up to date on the latest celebrities. Whereas here in the U.S., Instant Messaging is a little more focused on just core communications.

So, again, it's that regional flexibility, not just in language but also in how the users in that country want to experience the product.

LS: And because the technology is so flexible you do not have to hit any cultural barriers either.

DM: Exactly! And this is so key to Social Networking, you've got to figure out how we balance what we do, you know, as a global company, but to realize where our developers and partners plug in; and again just extend those experiences more and more.

LS: That's cool. Because The Social Media Bible is intended as a business book, is there businesses actually using Windows Live Messenger?

DM: Absolutely, there's two big ways that businesses use Windows Live Messenger. The first is, you know, in every business there is the folks sitting at every desk, the IT end users, are really consumers when they leave work. So we've got to make it really easy for IT pros to be able to manage, deploy, and get Windows Live Messenger on those desktops, whether it's from an OEM or on their own; then be able to manage them through things like group policy. This is because when you are at work and you're talking to one of your co-workers, you want to be able to show them the same photos that you were showing one of your other friends. You want to be able to get in touch with the same set of contacts, whether it's your family, friends, or some other people you know access. So we definitely do that.

The second thing you see is a lot of instant messaging and social experiences that are more designed for enterprises; whether that's things like office communication server and IBM SameTime, or Share Point service…things like that. And those are great for a lot of larger businesses that often want to create an entire infrastructure and management. For smaller and mid-sized businesses often they're just looking for a light Instant Messaging solution. And so Windows Live Messenger is great for them, too, not only does it give them, again, the chat, but some of the things they really value are file sharing, and calendar management. Also, being able to post files up to the Cloud and have private file storage just for their company are things that we try to make easy, too.

LS: So if I was working with a team within an enterprise…let's say either a design team, or even a marketing team…and I was traveling, I could have them in a group and I could Instant Message them ideas and keep everybody communicating and exchanging files.

DM: Yep, and actually groups is one of the things that in our latest release we've actually invested in a lot. So it's not only all the things you described, but that group could be a persistent group in your experience. So you know every time anyone in that group comes on line you can chat with everyone with one click all at the same time and have a virtual chat room. Then you have our own files stored in the Cloud where whether it's sharing documents or sharing photos, or keeping a group calendar. Then you can have those all in the Cloud. You can have them in Instant Messenger, or you can integrate them into Outlook. So if you happen to sit in Outlook all day but you want to get into your Windows Live Messenger contacts, or your calendar, you can pull all those straight into Outlook, too.

LS: Wow. So really this is for everybody from the entrepreneur to a Fortune 500 company?

DM: Yep, we definitely go for the breadth (Laughter).

LS: Yes you do. Geez. And you and I understand the term "Cloud" but for some of the other listeners who aren't quite familiar, can you just define putting your stuff in recalling it from the Cloud?

DM: Yes, so I would just generally describe the Cloud as almost like a hard drive in the internet somewhere. And so with that hard drive you might decide that everyone can access that hard drive and it's to set up files and photos and experiences. Anyone can get to it, or I can decide if it's my private hard drive and that I am the only one who can get there. Or it could be something in between where some people maybe can see it and other people can edit it. But it's basically it is the internet almost [14:3.6] that's out there. It's where all the websites and all the files storing and photos and everything lives.

LS: Okay. So it's like having an internet hard drive. So if I'm on the road, let's say, and I'm in Miami and I need to access some photographs, all I have to do is just use my Instant Messaging and just pull them up.

DM: Yes, through Windows Live you could pull them off and they would be sitting in SkyDrive and you might be able to do that from your…you might want to do that from your PC. When you're traveling you might want to do it from your mobile phone. Again, it's how you make that really easy no matter where you are; because it's your hard drive and they're your files and photos. You should be able to get to them when you want.

LS: That really is easy. Let me ask the ultimate question here; so is the Sky Drive an expensive service?

DM: The SkyDrive is free! SkyDrive is completely free and actually we just announced that SkyDrive is going up to 25 gigs.

LS: Whoa!

DM: Twenty-five gigabytes of storage for free!

LS: Whoa…serious!

DM: *Windows Live Messenger* is completely free. The entire set of Windows Lives' services and [15:32.7] applications…all entirely free. We make our money through advertising and advertisers are there, sometimes there are standard advertisements that you see on things, but often the advertisers are the ones who are building games and branded experiences and cool themes and pictures you can share with your friends; and so there are many different ways that advertisers plug in. But to you, everything is free!

LS: Wow, and you know, I don't mind advertisers; especially now with your ability to really target the advertisements to what my likes and dislikes are.

DM: Yep, and advertiser's completely; what they want to do is reach the person who cares about them. And so perhaps the goal of what they are really trying to do is, "How do we make advertising as useful for the consumer, or the person who is using our services; because at the end of the day that's good for you and it's good for the advertiser.

LS: See, that's a nice thing to hear. It's not often you hear people saying that it's making advertisements good for the user. It's usually just spamming; but you're absolutely right, the advertisements that do come through are very targeted and useful.

DM: Yep, it's definitely our goal.

LS: (Laughter) that's great! You had mentioned that you're bringing on some new features. Is there any kind of insights or secrets you could tell us, our listeners, about some of the new features you are going to be releasing?

DM: Yes. So right now we have a beta that's out, that we released just about two months ago, and we're polishing that up. We've been getting a bunch of feedback before we get the final release out. A lot of what

you start to see is for many years Windows Live had Messenger and we had Hot Mail and they were two stand-alone services; one of IM and one for email. We've really started to do, over the last year and which you'll see a ton more of, is how you weave together the fact that there is a bunch of social things that people want to do, and sometimes it's IM and chat, sometimes it's emails, sometimes it's photo sharing. Sometimes it's stuff that's not even on Windows Live, so when I'm on Windows Live and I've got a feed going of everything happening on Windows Live, it'd be great if I just didn't get my updates from Windows Live but I also got, "What am I doing on Flickr? What am I doing on Twitter?'

So a lot of what we are really investing in is the fact that, "Hey, you're one user and you want to have one place where you can manage all the stuff going on across your different websites and services that you use."

And so we signed up a ton of partners who are continuing to find out more, so that you can have that one place to see what's going on with all your contacts and all the things you are doing across the internet. It makes that really easy for you, so you do not have to go to 15 different websites with 15 log-ins and passwords, and everything.

LS: That really is important because with all the different Social Media websites out there, and you just mentioned….okay, Fllickr's a competitor, but a lot of people have a lot of content on there. So you're actually going to interface with a competitor?

DM: I look at them as competitors, but they are also partners. So we love you to use our photo sharing experience, but we fully realize a lot of people use Flickr and some of those people may never want to switch. So we'll make Windows Live work great with Flickr, too.

LS: See, that's a great attitude and that's why it's going to be successful.

DM: Yep.

LS: I love that. Is there any kind of a customer success story that you might be able to share?

DM: One of my favorites is actually one of the folks that works for me. It's actually a funny story about Windows Live Messenger….

One of his best friends, that's when he was in Graduate school, met a woman and the two of them met and they exchanged IM addresses, and they started chatting; and they were just friends. Then there was just one night where they just started talking and maybe flirting a little; and they consider that their first date where he actually asked her out, right over messenger.

And it was kind of funny that he is a little shy and so he used Messenger to first ask her out. They dated for a while. They traveled and while, and while they were, Remote Messenger was the way they would have video chats with each other and that's how they kept in touch. Later they got engaged and they were getting close to their wedding; and as they were getting ready for the wedding they started getting sentimental and thinking back on, "What are all the things that they've done, or what are the experiences that we've shared that we want to relive?"

And Messenger was one of the things, and so just before the wedding they planned to have one final date on Messenger. And so it was just a funny story and a great example of how something as simple as just an IM application that's become so much more. And it's really about how people stay in touch and it let's them express themselves and it really brings people together; sometimes into permanent bonds of marriage!

LS: (Laughter) that is pretty amazing. I mean, talk about "trusted network!"

DM: Yep!

LS: They just started with an IM and then their whole relationship built.

What's kind of cool is that they brought it around back again, full circle.

DM: Yep.

LS: That is really neat. Okay, you contributed to the happiness of a couple's life.

DM: Yep, we love doing things like that (Laughter).

LS: That is a great story, wow.

You shared a couple of stats. Can you summarize some of the statistics about what's going on with you guys?

DM: Yep. So we are over 325 million people worldwide; 85% + is international, so outside of the U.S., spanning over 55 different languages, a bunch of different dialects and customizations from there. We text a ton of messages, and so between those 325 million people they have 10's of billions of contact relationships between them; and in the short time you and I have been talking our users will send over about 100-150 million messages…just in this short time.

LS: Oh my gosh! Those are staggering statistics! Those are huge!

DM: So our servers are busy, for sure (Laughter)

LS: Oh, geez! So we mentioned mobile earlier, so this is something that you're committed to and you're going to be bringing on new apps and new partners?

DM: Definitely. And so mobile for us spans what I describe as three different layers. There's a layer that's around SMS services, and those pretty much apply to every phone out on the planet. And there's a layer of services that were offered that we call "Browse Services," so you access them from a web browser on your mobile phone.

So any mobile phone that's…they often call them WAF-capable...and that's actually a pretty large portion of phones these days; and then our highest-end, most of which are experienced on mobile, or what we call "Client Applications" for the phone…and there you really need a smart phone.

And again, we'll [21.47.7] for Windows Mobile and we'd love for you to get a

Windows Mobile Phone, but realize there's a lot of people that have Nokia or Blackberry or other, just Java phones, so we'll build client applications for all of those, too.

LS: Well, wow. You guys obviously got it down when it comes to Social Networking and Social Media. Are there some other different platforms that you might be able to…that you're working on, that you might be able to mention?

DM: The biggest thing that we are doing with Windows Live right now is the fact that because of some of what we spoke about earlier is really about bringing our social experiences into the context of where you are. So when you're in IM, we've got now our What's New feed that shows you all those photo sharing and feeds and updates; and all the things going on across your network. And we'll do that with Hot Mail, too.

So it's really about bringing Social into your other experiences, so you don't have to go somewhere else just to find these things. That's really the big focus for Windows Live.

The other thing you'll see Microsoft doing is on the enterprise side. We have for those business users a SharePoint service. So SharePoint Services and Share Point in general, grew up originally as more of a document management and file depository. And what you've noticed is that enterprise is just like consumers about becoming more and more social. And so SharePoint is going to continue to evolve and you've now got people's profiles in their expertise, and you've got the ability to manage stuff at the same time and create team sites and create groups.

The thing you'll see differently is that SharePoint, obviously, accesses more folks than enterprise, we'll think more about things like knowledge management and archival and IT group policy, and things like that. Whereas Windows Live will obviously focus more on some of the more consumer scenarios around having fun and interacting with your friends and family.

LS: Wow. Okay, so not only do you have products specifically for consumers and you have this cross-over of the Live Messaging that small businesses need and large businesses can use to keep in touch with their teams…but then you've got an entire enterprise division that's really taking Social Media and Social Networking as serious.

DM: Yep, definitely. The thing is that there is some fundamental stuff between the two that's the same, and so…whether it's like, "Hey, you want to have one log-in and one password." Or, "Files are files and we want to be able to get to those files from either."

And so we'll make some of those connections very easy between the two, but there're definitely some differences, too. So the policy and achieving requirements for a legal firm are quite different from what my mother would need for when she is sharing photos with me. And so it probably won't show up on our consumer experiences, but definitely would show up on our enterprise experiences.

LS: True. Okay, so I cannot wait to take advantage of these services. I mean, geez, 25 gigabytes and IM messaging and video and everything that we discussed, plus it's absolutely free. That's the thing that's amazing. That's what I love about Social Media.

The next question, obviously, is how does somebody get started? Where do they go?

DM: The first place you should go is Download.Live.com. That's where you can download all of our client applications. The latest beta is currently sitting there and it will very soon be updated to our final version. The only thing you'll need to get started is Windows Live ID.

So if you've got a Hot Mail account or a Messenger account, or any of those, you've already got one that's basically your address; and if you don't you can basically use any email address you already have. So even if it's a Yahoo account or Gmail account, you can just use that as your login to get in. And that's where you get started with *Windows Live Messenger*.

LS: Geez. Well, this is terrific; a lot of good data in here. I'm going to have to listen to this broadcast a couple of times myself.

Is there anything else you can add? Any other new ideas or thoughts or summary that our listeners may benefit from?

DM: Well the last thing I can tell you is use this on your PC, use this on the web, use this on a mobile phone; and definitely give us your feedback. We'd love to hear what you're thinking and what you're liking and what you're not liking. We're always looking to improve.

LS: And that's what I love to hear, too, is that you actually listen to the customers. Time and time again…just this morning I interviewed Gary Vaynerchuk, and the most important thing that he said was that he answers every single email; he reads them all because that's how he understands what his customers are wanting. I'm hearing now that Microsoft and you do exactly the same thing. You listen to the customers.

DM: Definitely! If we're not listeners, than we're not able to get our product out. You've got to listen to the customer.

LS: You've got to love that attitude, I appreciate that so much; I really do. So in closing, Dharmesh Mehta, thank you so very much for being here.

DM: Oh, thank you for having me.

LS: Geez;   this has been Dharmesh Mehta, the Director, and Product Management for Windows Live Instant Messaging. And this was totally cool, talking about community building and instant messaging. Thank you.

DM: Well, thank you and I'm looking forward to seeing *The Social Media Bible*.

LS: I appreciate that. And this has been Lon Safko, the co-author of *The Social Media Bible*. Be sure to check out our other valuable Social Media tactics, tools, and strategies that can be found in *The Social Media Bible* book, and its companion website, www.TheSocialMediaBible.com.

For more information about me, Lon Safko, please visit www.LonSafko.com. And again, Dharmesh, thank you again for taking the time!

DM: No problem, any time!