Webfusion places trust in reliable storage platform to deliver bullet-proof innovations in web hosting

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Summary

The Web hosting business is built on trust: Many of your customers rely on you for their entire operations, so if your service is down or unreliable it can be debilitating. This demand for high performance and high availability means that providers must have a robust technology infrastructure that thrives under constant pressure. For Webfusion, it's not just about building bullet-proof web services: It's also about providing pioneering, innovative solutions during a time of sharp company expansion. As the company looked to the future it realized it needed a storage solution that was not only technologically superior, but was capable of scaling up quickly and efficiently to satisfy a growing and highly demanding customer base. Just as its customers place their trust in Webfusion, Webfusion placed its trust in its storage solution provider to deliver a scalable, flexible, high-performance storage infrastructure. BlueArc has delivered on all counts, and now Webfusion is about to increase its storage capacity for the third time in less than three years.

The Customer

Webfusion has been a pioneer in providing services for websites in Europe for more than 13 years and is now Europe's leading provider of web hosting services, serving more than 2.5 million domain names and as many as 1.4 million host sites. The company has a wide cross section of solutions for customers, ranging from simple shared web hosting solutions to virtual private servers, dedicated servers, managed services and custom-built servers. Webfusion is part of Host Europe Group, which has more than seven hundred thousand customers and is the largest privately owned hosting company in Europe. Being part of a larger company with broader offerings has enabled Webfusion to focus on its core business of web hosting services, which has created both opportunities and challenges.

The Challenge

For Webfusion, one of the big challenges has been to manage growth, according to Macsen Galvin, head of product management. Not only is the company's customer base increasing, the company has also expanded through acquisition as well. "I joined the company in 2007 and we were mostly using single servers for hosting and email in some of the brands," Galvin recalls. "It was not very robust and, if one server went down, you could lose all of the customers on that box. There was no simple way to spread the load. We also had another platform that had been built earlier that was a clustered environment with shared storage, but we were finding as our usage grew the performance was degrading fast. We knew to continue growing we needed to have a longer-term solution and we started looking around for a partner to work with that offered a high-performance architecture."

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At the time, Webfusion had about 6 terabytes of storage space. As it looked out over a five-year period it estimated that it would need about five to 10 times that amount of storage as well as a comparable boost in performance. "We were trying to move away from an older style of hosting, with single servers, to a more robust platform — a cloud computing type of solution," says Galvin. "At the same time that we needed to grow, we were also looking for ways to reduce the amount of management and to reduce the costs of administration and overhead. The other thing was we had very high scaling requirements. We wanted to be able to quickly scale both the amount of disks and the space. We were doing a lot of CIFS and NFS operations and we wanted to be able scale the front-end storage solution."

The Solution

The team at Webfusion began looking for solutions that met their technical requirements and soon settled on two potential vendors: BlueArc and EMC. The team chose BlueArc and one of the reasons was the belief that the BlueArc team was extremely open about all of the costs involved in the solution and what it could and could not do for Webfusion. At the beginning of 2008, Webfusion installed a cluster of two Titan 2100 network storage solutions supporting about 18 terabytes of storage. A little more than a year later, Webfusion upgraded with an additional cluster of two Titan 3200 network storage solutions. The company now has about 45 terabytes of storage, with five terabytes of SATA, 26 terabytes of fibre channel and 14 terabytes of SAS.

The BlueArc storage solution is delivering far improved performance over the earlier systems and is supporting replication for backups. It is also supporting virtualization. Galvin says Webfusion has about 15 to 20 virtual file servers running on the BlueArc storage solution which enables the company to run different configurations based on usage requirements., One of the goals for Galvin was to reduce management costs and overhead, and he is extremely pleased with the results. "The BlueArc gives us a central place to manage what we need to do and it gives us the opportunity to do development efforts on different platforms," Galvin says. "It's very easy to manage — you can easily create new servers and new file systems. It tends to look after itself, to be honest. Another big advantage we've seen with the BlueArc is in availability. With our previous system everything was in one chassis and in order to upgrade or replace a part we would have to take the system down for a number of hours. With the BlueArc it just failed over to the resilient mode and our customers didn't notice it at all."

As Webfusion's business has grown and its demand for more storage has also grown, the simplicity of scaling up with the BlueArc solution has been a major advantage. "The upgrade has been very easy," Galvin says. "It's simply putting boards in. We've had no downtime. You can add more disks at any time and you're not going to see any scalability issues." Flexibility has also been an important factor. "When we were in the evaluation phase, we discovered some issues with integration with Windows. Within two weeks BlueArc implemented changes in the firmware. They were quite responsive."

The Results

The BlueArc solution has enabled Webfusion to focus on providing services to customers and not worrying about what can — or cannot — be supported by the underlying infrastructure. "Having the BlueArc solution in place has enabled us to keep the focus on where we need to be as a business," added Galvin. "With the previous storage systems we had in place there were things we couldn't do because we were constrained by the system. Since the BlueArc has been installed we're not constrained by worrying about storage — we know it scales, we know the current load, we know how to scale the system. That has given us freedom and flexibility — we're designing our business around ideas and not platforms. It has enabled us to focus on what's best for the business, rather than worrying about what can the platform take." Another major benefit has been reliability. "We have confidence in the system," Galvin says. "We've had no outages of any significant size — and we could not say that before, not with our individual servers or with our earlier cluster. So we're seeing a two-fold improvement — in reliability and in focus. We don't have to worry about what the platform can do."

The Conclusion

When Webfusion began its search for a new storage provider, it wasn't just seeking the vendor with the best technology solution, it was also looking for a company that could be a long-term partner to support Webfusion's growth as a business. Galvin is pleased with the results. "BlueArc supported us when we moved our data centre from London to Leeds and we were able to make the move with no downtime. They are very good at saying what things are do-able. From our point of view we have an open relationship and if we tell them we're thinking about doing something they work with us so we can accomplish our goals. That was one of the reasons we wanted to go with them in the first place — in addition to the technical aspects, we wanted a good quality two-way relationship. By buying at the entry levels we had plenty of expansion capability and, because we have piece of mind, we keep purchasing. We know we will get good service and we will get the things we need from BlueArc."

For more information
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