

SKINNYCORP, INC.

SkinnyCorp's Growth Presents a Challenge for Rackspace®

SkinnyCorp, Inc., a Chicago-based consulting firm, was started in late 2000 with the purpose of client-driven web development. As a hobby, the founders created a website called *Threadless.com* to give designers and artists a venue to display their creativity for the masses. A one or two day a week side project to make a little extra money soon exploded into an Internet phenomena and took over as skinnyCorp's main source of capital. For the past five years, Threadless has grown through reputation and a series of contests that are the backbone of this Internet t-shirt company.



Situation

Threadless receives roughly 150 new t-shirt design submissions daily. These amateur designs are then voted on weekly and the top designs are printed and sold. Winning designers receive \$2,000 in cash and prizes and are forever immortalized on cotton.

But being a small company that receives more than 150 daily design submissions through the site, creates and distributes a daily newsletter to its some 300,000 subscribers, and process hundreds of orders hourly has its fair share of problems.

"The biggest problem is we are always growing," says Harper Reed, project engineer, skinnyCorp, Inc. "We don't dictate our own growth; it's our customers who dictate how fast we grow." And growing has been skinnyCorp's biggest obstacle when it comes to their infrastructure.



Prior to hosting with Rackspace, skinnyCorp began with a dedicated server in a small, local collocation facility but quickly needed more. They moved their configuration to a larger collocation facility but their continued growth forced them to continually add servers and became too time consuming.

"We announced a Christmas sale in 2004 and immediately our servers crashed from overwhelming web traffic," says Reed. "This wasn't the first time something like this had happened. We saw hundreds of companies out there announce large sales on their websites and they don't crash, so there was obviously a solution out there for our problem. We just needed to find that kind of reliability."

And they found that reliability and more at Rackspace.

Solution

With growth like this, skinnyCorp basically had two options; move their infrastructure in-house and hire a small army of system administrators to run it or find an IT hosting specialist. For skinnyCorp, given the cost of buying all new hardware and hiring the people to keep it running 24/7, it made more sense financially to rely on a hosting provider.

"I knew of Rackspace because I used to work for an advertising agency that used Rackspace during a Super Bowl ad campaign a few years back," says Reed. "I had a great experience with Rackspace and the project was a success. So when our servers went down during another large sale, I decided to call Rackspace and get the ball rolling."

And it's been rolling along smoothly ever since. Reed found that if skinnyCorp needed more servers, Rackspace obliged. SkinnyCorp announces another huge sale, the site doesn't go down.

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"In the past, our site would go down for a week and we'd consider that normal. But with Rackspace, we experience zero downtime," laughs Reed when describing the drastic change in what he calls their 'threshold of a bad situation.' "So if our site were to go down, even for a minute, we'd probably freak out and wonder what was going on. But it definitely feels good to be in a position with that high of expectations. It's that kind of reliability that every business needs to succeed."

SkinnyCorp currently has 18 Dell PowerEdge 2850 dual-processor Intel Xeon Servers running Red Hat Enterprise Linux, a CSS 11503 Load Balancer, a Pix 525UR firewall, SAN, managed backup and Rackspace custom monitoring.

Benefits

While growth does have its headaches, it has been very rewarding for skinnyCorp. Last year, skinnyCorp sold \$6.2 million worth of t-shirts, its fourth straight year of quadrupling sales. Relying on Rackspace shows skinnyCorp is dedicated to keep this trend going.

"Hands down, the most important thing we get out of using Rackspace is the ability to scale quickly," says Reed. "Sometimes I'll call up our account manager, freaking out, saying I need a dozen servers by Thursday. He'll calm me down and say 'no problem, but how about Friday?' Sometimes it feels like I ask for the impossible and Rackspace delivers. To me that's Fanatical Support in action."

Along with the ability to grow exponentially, skinnyCorp has found another benefit to hosting at Rackspace: replication. Reed admits skinnyCorp had never done replication before coming to Rackspace and doesn't know how he lived without it. "I'd call up my account manager and tell him I needed to replicate another server as soon as possible and before I could blink, it was done."

However, skinnyCorp's growing configuration isn't solely committed to Threadless. They are continually coming up with new ideas and websites, especially geared toward the Web 2.0 social networks.

One of those sites is *ExtraTasty.com*, a thread where anyone can go and share drink recipes. Another one of skinnyCorp's ventures is a forum created for web designers to chat and share ideas on creating community-driven web sites. SkinnyCorp has many other sites in the works that can be found through their homepage.

Reed would tell stories of nights when his team would be working on a project and someone from their Rackspace account team would pop-in or call just to see how it was going and see if they needed any help.

"Who does that?" asks Reed. "To me, that's Fanatical. I've always found that the people at Rackspace are very knowledgeable and actually enjoy what they are doing, and that's rare. It makes us feel Rackspace has just as much interest in seeing our business succeed as we do."

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