

ShopLocal™

Handling Huge Holiday Traffic Spikes

In 1999, ShopLocal, originally known as SalesHound.com, began supporting nationwide and local retailers by providing branded, online versions of the circular advertising supplements placed in local newspapers. As ShopLocal became a leader in multi-channel shopping services, the popularity of its SmartCircular™ product spread like wildfire throughout the retail and advertising communities. Not surprisingly, as retail shopping activity increases around the Thanksgiving and Christmas holidays, so does online activity at the retailers' SmartCircular sites. ShopLocal and Rackspace partnered to proactively address the challenges of handling huge spikes in website traffic that occur during the end-of-year holiday shopping season. The company's great success is due, in large part, to carefully planning and implementing a technical architecture that is both scalable and fault-tolerant.

The partnership began in 2003 when Rackspace provided supplemental support to help CrossMedia Services (*later to be renamed ShopLocal*) handle its anticipated surge in online activity during the holiday shopping season. ShopLocal officials recognized it found a IT hosting provider that not only had the technical expertise but also the flexibility to support ShopLocal's requirements. Consequently, ShopLocal moved its hundreds of sites over to the IT hosting experts at Rackspace.

What retailer in the United States closes up during those frenetic shopping days between Thanksgiving and New Year's? Not a one. So imagine an online company that supports hundreds of national and local retailers by providing branded, online versions of their weekly circulars. What kind of tolerance levels are site owners likely to have for downtime when millions of shoppers are online and looking for deals during the country's busiest shopping days? Pretty close to zero. The need for uninterrupted site availability and unflagging site performance—even in the face of huge traffic spikes—is ultimately what prompted ShopLocal to entrust its hundreds of websites to the managed hosting experts at Rackspace.

Finding Support for Major Traffic Spikes

ShopLocal assists hundreds of the country's leading retailers and thousands of local businesses grow their sales using the Internet.

One of the business ventures for which ShopLocal is most well known involves the online presentation of store circulars. Every week, ShopLocal loads its Web servers with interactive images of the same circulars that will be appearing in Sunday newspapers around the country. If you want to see what Circuit City, Home Depot, Walgreens, CVS, Sears or any of more than 100 other retailers are offering for sale this week, you can click on the Weekly Ad link on the retailer's home page. This may appear to take you to another part of the retailer's site to view an online version of the retailer's localized circular—but a close inspection of the URL will indicate that you are actually visiting a site on a ShopLocal server, hosted at Rackspace. You can browse the virtual pages, pull up the details about items on sale and see the address and phone number of the store nearest you.

Company Profile

ShopLocal is the leader of multi-channel shopping services. The Chicago-based company works with retailers and shoppers throughout the United States. ShopLocal.com is one of the top five most visited comparison shopping properties on the Internet, and the premier Web site that offers both online and in-store sales, deals and promotions.

Situation

The number of visitors to ShopLocal's Web sites skyrocketed during the holiday season, and ShopLocal needed a managed hosting service provider that could ensure the availability and performance of its sites during peak periods.

Solution

After successfully working with Rackspace to provide support for overflow traffic during the 2003 holiday season, ShopLocal decided to move all of its sites to the Rackspace data center.

Benefits

- High Availability
- Rapid Response to Calls
- Fanatical Support®
- Solid Technical Expertise

"In the past, we've essentially had to double our infrastructure for a short period. Rackspace has always been willing to work with us on that."

Henry Birger
Director of Technology Infrastructure, ShopLocal

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Just like the brick-and-mortar stores whose circulars it presents, ShopLocal.com sees a huge spike in visitor traffic between Thanksgiving and the end of the December holiday season. Indeed, infrastructure requirements can double quickly and stay that way for four to eight weeks.

"For about three days—the Wednesday, Thursday and Friday that encompass the Thanksgiving Holiday—we have seen traffic spikes of 400 percent or more," says Bill McCarthy, Chief Operating Officer at ShopLocal. "It dwarfs all the traffic for the rest of the year. It settles down a bit after that, but the remainder of November and December is very high compared to the other ten months of the year."

Fanatical Support Backs a Flexible Infrastructure

Late in 2003, ShopLocal was still working with another hosting provider, but it engaged Rackspace on a supplemental basis during the end-of-year shopping season. That relationship did more than help ShopLocal get through the season; it introduced ShopLocal to the kind of dedication and technical expertise that comes with Rackspace Fanatical Support. That experience soon gave way to a series of conversations about how Rackspace might be able to play a greater role in ensuring the availability and performance of ShopLocal's sites. Within six months, ShopLocal had moved its hundreds of websites to servers in the Rackspace data center and was working closely with Rackspace to plan for the 2004 seasonal spikes.

"We had extensive conversations with Rackspace," says McCarthy, "and we came away with confidence in their abilities. We knew we were talking to people who knew how to do the work. We have direct access to the engineers and specialists, and we have been able to work closely with them to build a best-of-class solution."

Indeed, that best-of-class solution consists of servers running the Microsoft Windows Server 2003 operating system. It also includes load balancers that have been specially configured to route ShopLocal's millions of visitors and distribute them amongst all the servers within a particular web farm. ShopLocal maintains more than 300 distinct sites that an individual may come to visit and search for deals. In addition, the ShopLocal configuration at Rackspace includes dedicated routers, managed firewalls, a multi-terabyte storage area network and customized monitoring services.

ShopLocal's infrastructure is subject to swift changes, given the rapid growth that the company has experienced and the huge spikes in traffic that it sees during the holiday shopping season.

"Rackspace gave us the level of technical expertise that was necessary for us to have confidence that our changing needs could be addressed quickly and with the reliability that is needed to insure that we are up 24x7," adds Birger. "The pricing was very competitive, but even more valuable to us was the fact that Rackspace was willing to be very flexible. Two months of every year are very different than the other ten months, and we need to adjust our configuration during that time. In the past, we've essentially had to double our infrastructure for a short period and Rackspace has always been willing to work with us on that."

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