COMPREHENSIVE ANALYSIS OF FTSE 100 WEBSITES REVEALS ALARMING PERFORMANCE ISSUES

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Research released today by Parallel Ltd, a UK-based network management company, reveals that the current mean availability of FTSE 100 companies' Web sites equates to 99.53 per cent per annum - 41 hours of downtime. The findings, based on monitoring on-line performance over a three-month period, identifies that 13 per cent of the sites did not achieve 99 per cent availability. The Internet presence of one company - a large retailer with an on-line purchasing function - was off-line for 1.84 per cent over the period, the equivalent of almost 7 days per annum.

Retailers, who stand to gain the most from efficient websites, were among the poorest performers. On average the general retail sites surveyed were unavailable to customers for a total of three days per year. In the on-line environment where an alternative vendor is a mouse click away, a poor customer experience can not only lose sales, but damage customer loyalty and negatively impact brand perception.

"The denial of service attacks in 2001 on Yahoo, e-Bay and Amazon.com underline the importance of on-line performance. According to generally accepted analysis, the attacks collectively cost around   billion in lost sales, damage to the brand, the need to upgrade systems and the direct impact on market capitalisation. Indeed, it is clear that the customer's experience of a company's Web site will increasingly have a direct impact on sales and brand reputation. The more so when you consider that many of the FTSE 100 companies now use the Web to automate key relationships with partners and suppliers, " Comments Tim Moore, director, Parallel.

One of the issues highlighted by the research is the current approach to performance analysis. The speed of the Web's integration into business processes has not been matched by the development of performance analysis techniques. Companies currently use network management tools to monitor the availability of their Web servers, however while all servers may be functioning adequately, this does not mean that the customer accessing the Web site is having a positive experience. Bandwidth, download speeds and page redirections can impair the customer's view of the site.

Continues Moore, "Companies must recognise that if they have an on-line presence the Internet is an extension of their network. Simply monitoring servers is not enough. The best benchmark is to interrogate Web sites as a customer would - using systems that constantly try to download the site from a range of ISPs to create a true picture of the way their business conveys itself to the customer."

In addition, most companies rely on their ISP to provide performance data. The data is then used to check if the ISP has met its agreed service level agreements (SLA). Not one company achieved the 'five nines' SLA that many companies aspire to. This suggests that IT managers should check the analysis they are using to validate the performance of their SLA.

Performance monitoring

In analysing performance, Parallel used its Nexus Watch monitoring product. Using two ISPs, the FTSE 100 Web sites were interrogated automatically at intervals of five minutes to develop a clear picture of on-line performance. Several key criteria emerged that companies should consider when benchmarking their on-line performance.

Site Availability

Site availability is an important variable - a customer may be prepared to wait a short while for a page to appear, but if nothing happens or an error is returned, customers will go elsewhere.

Using new Web monitoring products, companies can track their real site availability and isolate specific problems as they occur. It also ensures that companies have access to their own data and will no longer be reliant on analysis provided by their ISP's.

Server Performance

It is generally accepted that a Web page download time of eight seconds or less is required to provide an acceptable 'feeling of speed'. Parallel's research revealed that for customers using a standard modem, this limit would be breeched for 44 per cent of the FTSE 100 companies. Using a web management system such as Nexus Watch that monitors customers' experience of the site, problems with download times would be spotted in minutes. Parallel found that in one instance, a company took over 26 days to resolve a serious performance problem that was causing a 29 second delay for customers downloading their home page.

Page Size

Parallel's research showed that the average home page size of FTSE 100 companies was 59,760 bytes. "Some web designers recommend that web pages do not exceed 30k bytes. The average for the FTSE 100 companies

was nearly double. The worst culprit had nearly twenty times the recommended amount. Let's not forget we are talking about one single page," adds Moore.

It is imperative for all companies (and especially those who using the web as a shop front) to provide an efficient service to customers. If a customer simply wants a contact number, they should not have to wait for video clips and graphics to download.

ISP Data

It is a well-documented issue that companies often rely on performance data supplied by ISP's to assess their site availability. From the research it is clear that this might not always be the best method. The worst offender for availability was offline for the equivalent of over 19 days per annum, clearly below the expectations of any large company. Because of the monitoring methods employed, ISP's may not include all of the downtime experienced by customers in their reports. However independent analysis from a customer's perspective can detect site failures that traditional monitoring can miss.

Monitoring

The results were collated during a three-month project to monitor the home pages of the FTSE 100 companies. Parallel used its Web monitoring service, Nexus Watch, for the research. It acts as a 'virtual customer' and views Web sites exactly as customers do, allowing companies to instantly tackle downtime and performance issues or hacking and unauthorised postings.

Nexus Watch requires no installation of software and there is no need to change any internal technology. Nexus Watch can begin to monitor a company's website immediately and a company can receive performance alerts within minutes.

About Parallel

Parallel is a dedicated network systems and enterprise management company. It partners with a broad range of vendors including Sun, Cisco, NetScout and HP. Key customers include BNP Paribas, Vivendi Universal, Alcatel and HOT Telecom.

For more information please visit http://www.parallel.ltd.uk and http://www.nexuswatch.com

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