



WHAT MICROSOFT SHAREPOINT HOSTING CUSTOMERS WANT

How AIS Network and Rackspace have kept up with the unique requirements of their SharePoint hosting customers

By Wayne Epperson

When Microsoft rolled out SharePoint to the world in March 2001, the level of corporate optimism in Redmond soared like Mount Rainier 90 miles to the south. In some executive suites, the hopes, dreams and expectations for the new content management system may have even dwarfed the 14,411-foot summit.

The early anticipation and excitement over SharePoint was followed by instant acceptance among forward-thinking

business and IT leaders who envisioned possibilities of the new platform within their organizations. And as worldwide deployments increased, Microsoft refined its product with successive iterations to reach the latest version, SharePoint 2013.

Among the leading hosting providers offering a variety of SharePoint options today are two major players: AIS Network of McLean, Va., and Rackspace Hosting of San Antonio, Texas.

Within weeks of Microsoft's initial intro-

duction 12 years ago, AIS Network foresaw the future of the new product and began installing SharePoint Team Services 1.0.

In its dozen years of history with the product, AIS Network has spent a lot of time listening to what customers want from SharePoint while also protecting their mission-critical data. And those customer needs have evolved along with the introduction of legislative compliance requirements and technology advancements. Just three years ago, customers wanted a host-

ing provider to have world-class expertise, longevity in the SharePoint hosting business and a robust delivery model.

But today, those same customers want so much more, AIS Network CEO Jay Atkinson says.

"They're also looking for a provider with very high standards for compliance, security, reliability, availability and responsiveness. That means they want to work with a provider who is SSAE 16-audited and can meet SOX, PCI, HIPAA, FISMA and other regulatory standards," Atkinson says.

Customers want a provider who operates in a Tier III/Tier IV data center, because disaster resilience, fault tolerance and near perfect uptime are crucial. That's a tall order, Atkinson says, and not every SharePoint hosting provider is prepared or equipped to deliver at that level.

SharePoint customers are more value focused because of today's shrinking budgets. While they may still want dedicated server solutions, they recognize that widespread adoption of virtualization has dramatically improved server utilization and efficiency, Atkinson says.

AIS Network's SharePoint customer base is spread across public, private and non-profit sectors in the mid-size and enterprise-class environments that have stringent compliance requirements. Its strongest markets are government, health care/pharmaceuticals and financial services. The accounting, legal and manufacturing verticals are experiencing growth.

AIS Network's offerings include fully managed hosting from private, public and hybrid cloud products as well as dedicated hosting.

A high-profile example of AIS Network's success is its selection by the Virginia Information Technologies Agency to offer IT hosting via eGov to governmental entities throughout the state.

Most customers want to maintain complete control of their SharePoint environments and take advantage of the many features offered in SharePoint 2010 and the new 2013 releases. But many of the features in the latest version packaged as Office 365 are still limited, so clients look to AIS Network for dedicated server farms

and private clouds that are easily scalable, Atkinson says.

The Virginia-based host has seen a significant growth in companies deploying their private sites using SharePoint. Private cloud environments offer high availability and fully managed scalability for optimum performance for the most demanding websites built with SharePoint. And its SPLA licensing model includes a "SharePoint for Internet Sites," an option priced on month-to-month usage that eliminates huge capital expenditures for a public-facing website. That enables companies to deploy their public-facing websites without significant monetary outlay for licensing.

When it comes to helping partners win SharePoint customers, AIS Network maintains a high availability and responsiveness to help them win a deal through a customized hosting approach that will best serve the customer and beat the competition, Atkinson says.

Customers who come to Rackspace for SharePoint solutions are committed to using the product, but don't want to manage it. They want expert guidance on how to use SharePoint successfully inside their businesses, Jeff DeVerter, director of SharePoint Services for Rackspace says.

That customer base ranges from the small SMB market using a single server to some of the largest enterprises in the world with more than 60 servers deployed for in excess of 100,000 users in a cross-section of industries. The commonality among them is that they rate the SharePoint service as the highest of all services they receive from Rackspace's world-class Fanatical Support, DeVerter says.

Rackspace, which has been cited four times as Microsoft Partner of the Year and is a leader in the Gartner Magic Quadrant in Managed Hosting, has a team of 50 certified specialists devoted to its SharePoint offerings in hosting and professional services.

Customers range from a single per-user requirement to complex dedicated farms with intricate back-office integrations. Others find a solution in dedicated SharePoint farms powered by the Rackspace open

cloud for the best balance in implementations and cloud server flexibility.

"Rackspace can meet the most stringent security with dedicated SharePoint farms powered by dedicated infrastructure in our managed hosting division. These dedicated farms can be stand alone or fully integrated into a customer's back-end systems," DeVerter says.

The most popular SharePoint hosting plans beyond a simple multi-tenant collection include Rackspace's dedicated farms. Those farms range from the small presence containing servers for Active Directory, SQL and SharePoint to medium-sized farms that add additional servers to provide resiliency and capacity to the core roles of SharePoint. It is very common to add the capability for business intelligence, development resources, or complex search configurations.

One marquee Rackspace client that was attracted by the host's depth and breadth of expertise is Edelman Public Relations, an independent public relations firm with a global footprint in 30 countries. Edelman uses a Rackspace Services for SharePoint solution to manage its 54 offices worldwide.

Both Atkinson and DeVerter agree that Microsoft has done an excellent job in adding features and functionality to SharePoint over the life of the product versions. But there are caveats going forward and each man has a different concern.

Atkinson says migration could be made easier, and he expects that to occur. But as it stands, a customer cannot move to SharePoint 2013 unless they are already running SharePoint 2010.

DeVerter expresses some concern over what appears to be Microsoft's recent increased interest in adding features to Office 365 instead of addressing the enterprise needs.

But each remains committed to delivering the robustness of SharePoint, Microsoft's best-selling product, to meet the heightened demand of customers to better manage, analyze and share an ever-growing pool of diverse content and granular data. ■