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Do You Need a Web Site Monitoring Service?

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Abstract

Regardless of your search engine ranking and site marketing, it is of little value if your site is down. Web site monitoring explained and how you benefit by using such a service.

Article

You can do a splendid job obtaining high search engine ranking and an equally fine job marketing your site. However, your hard work will be of little value unless your site and servers are up and fully operational. Unfortunately, items such as software lockups, hardware failures, databases, hackers, viruses, worms, service patches, and Internet connectivity can all play a critical role in your online success. Enter firms that specialize in email, site, and server monitoring. What exactly is "server, email, and web site monitoring"?

Web site monitoring refers to monitoring the operational status and performance of a web site that uses HTTP and/or HTTPS. Likewise, email monitoring refers to the monitoring, operational status and performance of SMTP servers to insure that mail is flowing correctly and timely. Server monitoring refers to monitoring the operational status and performance of other server services such as FTP. While the difference may seem slight, it is important to note the difference.

How does monitoring work?

Monitoring firms attempt to connect to your site or server service at regular intervals via the Internet. If the monitoring service is unable to connect and verify correct operational status, most firms will retry based on customer defined timeout and retry levels. If operational status still cannot be confirmed, then a customer defined contact list is notified. Upon resumption of service, most monitoring services will notify the contact list again informing them the site or server service is operational.

Determining Operational Status

Some monitoring services simply use ping to see if a server answers and record the response times during the process. Some services use more complex techniques such as checking web page code, database connectivity, keyword verification, and email round robin. The important point to consider is how a monitoring firm determines operational status. A ping request for example may verify the server has power, but does not guarantee a web site or server services is operational.

Most monitoring services provide detailed statistics that can be especially helpful in verifying SLA and QOS agreements are being honored. When reviewing monitoring services, insure that the method used to determine operational status is applicable to your SLA or QOS agreement.

What Changes Are Required?

Some monitoring services require that executables be installed on your server. While this practice is not wide spread, it does exist. Most Internet monitoring services can query your site or server service without the need of agents and the associated complexity and maintenance required by installing additional software.

If you need to monitor sites or servers that are behind a firewall, a firewall rule will need to be established. Most monitoring services will provide originating IP information upon request.

Intervals

Monitoring "interval" is simply the frequency in which a site or server is checked. Most monitoring services offer packages ranging from 2 to 60 minutes. Since monitoring costs are largely based on the monitoring interval, it is important to determine downtime interval is acceptable. If the site or server is mission critical, 2 minute monitoring intervals may be required to avoid revenue loss. On the other hand, a site or server operating a hobby may not require monitoring at all.

Contact List and Methods

Most monitoring firms email a contact list in the event of an issue. There are four important points to consider: (1) your e-mail availability; (2) the number of persons that can be contacted; (3) testing your email devices; and (4) additional costs.

If you carry an email enabled cellular phone, pager, PDA, or other device 24/7 you are in great shape. However, if you check e-mail a few times per day, having your server monitored at 2 minutes intervals makes little sense if the monitoring service uses email notification. Take a realistic assessment of your email availability. My personal solution was to email enable my cellular phone. The email address is not published and the phone is with me 24/7.

Most monitoring firms offer the ability to contact multiple persons. The logic is that someone on the list will be available to react to an issue. While this approach may sound odd, it may make sense to contact your Webmaster, LAN administrator, yourself, or others depending on your staff size, work schedules, and hosting arrangement.

Most monitoring firms offer the ability to send "test" messages to your contact list. This feature is provided to ensure everyone on your contact list is correctly receiving notification messages.

Read the fine print. Some firms have "additional" charges for pager messages and if you exceed a specific number of notifications per month. As everyone involved in technology knows, the unexpected normally happens, and on a daily basis. It is important to understand what you are agreeing to and your level of financial commitment.

Costs

Monitoring costs vary greatly depending on the monitoring interval, method used to determine operational status, and services provided. Generally prices range from free to \$99.00 per month. Mission critical server packages normally range fall in the \$30.00 - \$60.00 per monthly range.

Closing

Monitoring firms perform monitoring from outside your organizational IT infrastructure in the same fashion the world accesses your servers. Doing so ensures that your servers are truly available to your visitors and items such as firewall are correctly configured. Depending on your business goals, monitoring can be a valuable resource and play a critical role in your online success.