

Ordering up on demand services: Color Maria improves its online e-commerce solution with support from IBM.



Overview

■ **Challenge**

Support an ASP e-commerce solution with virtually uninterrupted infrastructure availability to increase business resilience and flexibility

■ **Solution**

Comprehensive colocation hosting services from a state-of-the-art IBM e-business Hosting™ Center—staffed around the clock with skilled technicians and equipped with a sophisticated networking infrastructure

■ **Key Benefits**

Enhanced resilience of critical systems; increased skills scalability resulting from the ability to leverage IBM expertise; and an opportunity to take advantage of innovative Linux virtual services

Addressing a catalog retail needs niche: facilitated Web channel integration

Incorporated in 2000 in Savannah, Georgia, Color Maria, Inc. (www.colormaria.com) serves mid-sized catalog retail companies seeking to expand their business onto the Internet or to enhance their existing Web capabilities and revenues. “We offer a robust, Web-based tool set—a comprehensive solution including shopping cart, catalog, e-mail and marketing capabilities—to meet the e-commerce needs of medium-sized catalog retailers,” says Blake Ellis, Chief Executive Officer for Color Maria. “We don’t try to be everything to everybody: We focus on an underappreciated niche in the e-commerce software market,” he says.

What sets Color Maria’s solutions apart from competitive offerings is that they are designed to integrate e-commerce channels without requiring significant modification to existing business processes. “Many tools on the market focus on offline

retail processes such as call center operations and order processing,” Ellis explains. “However,” he continues, “solutions available to help Web-enable catalog business channels often require specialized expertise, lack flexibility to integrate with existing backend systems or are simply overpriced.”

In response to feedback from customers indicating that most Web channel integration packages were too costly, complex or inflexible to meet their needs, Color Maria developed an application service provider (ASP) solution capable of integrating directly with leading backend technologies.

“The combination of the Linux feature set and ongoing IBM hosting services enables us to remotely perform 99 percent of our monitoring and maintenance functions. When there is something we can’t do, we can have an IBM technician working on our hardware within a few minutes.”

—Blake Ellis, Chief Executive Officer,
Color Maria, Inc.

To meet market demand for its ASP solution, the growing company required a scalable, flexible technology environment hosted by a reliable provider. “Initially, we maintained servers with a local hosting provider; however, the technical options available lacked key security features that we required,” recalls Ellis. “For example, local Internet service providers offered unprotected shared environments and did not staff onsite personnel around the clock,” recalls Ellis, adding, “so when we did maintenance on our hardware, we actually had access to other companies’ machines—and they had easy access to ours.”

A solution with the right fit: IBM e-business Hosting services

Widening its search for a comprehensive colocation hosting solution, Color Maria compared several top-tier providers located in larger metropolitan areas—and selected IBM. “For a comparable price, the services that IBM offered were heads and shoulders above what we could find locally,” explains Ellis. “And, because we are an entirely Linux-based shop, IBM industry leadership in Linux know-how and expertise is also critical to us.”

Currently, Color Maria manages and monitors its own hardware systems, located within an IBM e-business Hosting facility. “We are a do-it-yourself colocation client,” says Ellis, explaining that Color Maria manages its own environment, which is housed in a locked server cabinet within a private cage on the floor of an IBM hosting facility. “Our entire ASP solution is hosted from a dedicated, state-of-the-art IBM data center—staffed around the clock with skilled technicians and equipped with a sophisticated networking infrastructure,” says Ellis. “Plus, the IBM e-business Hosting Center staff is extremely professional and knowledgeable.”

Safeguarding core systems to enhance resilience to external threats

According to Ellis, Color Maria’s flexible, security-rich IBM colocation solution is helping the company improve its business resilience. “Because our business-critical environment is protected by layers of IBM security features and redundancy, our customers can count on the availability of our e-commerce solutions,” he says. Ellis also reports that physical security features wrapped around Color Maria’s hardware continues to surprise him.

“IBM is always watching: I am still shocked when we’re in the cage working on our server and looking around for a specific screwdriver, and an IBM technician suddenly appears and hands us exactly the right one,” he says.

Moreover, relying on IBM to safeguard its business-critical systems has helped Color Maria shorten its sales cycle. “When we talk to prospective customers, we can easily address concerns about uptime, networking and redundancies by describing our infrastructure and the IBM data center,” says Ellis. He continues, “This means we can spend more time talking to them about how to increase their sales, which translates into more time spent building our business.”

Stocking up on flexible support services from IBM

Color Maria maintains a small headcount and is able to scale its skills resources dynamically in response to changing demand by relying on IBM expertise. “We can keep our size small and then ramp up by tapping into IBM specialists as well as contract programmers or freelancers,” says Ellis, explaining how IBM continues to help the growing company maintain a flexible, scalable business model. “For example, if we can’t solve a problem ourselves, IBM can quickly bring in a team of Linux experts to tackle our issue,” he adds.

Equipped with on demand technical assistance from IBM, Color Maria also feels confident in its ability to remotely manage its underlying systems. “We were nervous about moving our precious servers to a location four hours away. However, the combination of the Linux feature set and ongoing IBM hosting services enables us to remotely perform 99 percent of our monitoring and maintenance functions,” he says. “When there is something we can’t do, we can have an IBM technician working on our hardware within a few minutes.”

Virtualization: the journey to e-business on demand continues

Color Maria is working with IBM to leverage leading-edge IBM e-business on demand™ technologies to further enhance the flexibility, responsiveness and resilience of its business. “We intend to offload most of our server management responsibilities to IBM. Instead of employing systems consultants, we can let IBM technical specialists oversee our environment and thus reduce our staffing costs,” says Ellis. To this end, Color Maria is considering taking advantage of IBM Managed Hosting - Linux virtual services—an innovative offering that leverages logical partitioning to create multiple virtual Linux environments on a single server.

“IBM provides a remarkable spectrum of flexible, variable service options. It’s comforting to know that we can count on IBM to provide us with the exact hosting services we need, when and how we need them.”

*—Blake Ellis, Chief Executive Officer,
Color Maria, Inc.*

“Linux virtual services could enable us to dynamically allocate capacity to customers as needed,” explains Ellis, adding that this approach could potentially help Color Maria expand its revenues by enabling the company to provide dedicated Linux environments to its clients without having to buy new hardware. Ellis concludes: “As more on demand services become available, we will turn increasingly to IBM to help us optimize our business.”

For more information

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