CASE STUDY

FanSided

Running a Better Option:

HOW HOSTWAY HELPED SPORTS BLOG NETWORK FANSIDED HANDLE NFL-SEASON
TRAFFIC WITH A HYBRID HOSTING PLATFORM

OVERVIEW

When the FanSided Network (fansided.com) grew from a small, regional sports blog to a national sports blogging network, their sites began to experience slowdowns and frequent crashes, especially during the traffic-heavy NFL season. Recognizing the damage these technological issues could cause to their brand as well as to advertising and blogger relationships, they began to seek a partner that could offer the expertise of a larger provider while also providing the responsive support of a smaller company. Hostway and its partner Cynch met the challenge with a hybrid cloud setup that easily managed the traffic fluctuations that could have crippled FanSided's operation.

THE PROBLEM: GROWING PAINS LEAVE BLOGGERS, READERS FEELING DEFEATED

FanSided started as a blog in 2006, covering the NFL's Kansas City Chiefs. After the site began to increase in popularity, its founders saw the opportunity to expand their scope to include news on other NFL teams, and eventually college teams across the country. Soon, the company grew to a network hosting more than 200 blogs, with more than 500 bloggers covering teams and topics across the spectrum of sports. Despite having just three full-time employees, the site manages to attract about 3 million unique visitors per month during every season except NFL season, when traffic typically doubles.

FanSided's infrastructure was simple: It was run on two web servers and a dedicated database server with a smaller hosting provider. In the spring and summer, this setup was generally sufficient, but during NFL season, the traffic surges would cause the site to run extremely slowly or even crash, an inconvenience that was not only turning off FanSided visitors, but hindering the network's array of bloggers and costing the company valuable advertising revenue.

"Our hosting provider was slow to respond, and had a hard time properly tuning to help ease the growing pains," said Matt Blake, FanSided VP of Technology.

Anticipating the seasonal traffic spike for fall 2012, Blake determined the company would need to seek a hosting provider whose technology would be reliable enough to handle the fluctuating load and be cost-effective enough to work within the bounds of their bootstrap budget.

"In terms of importance to our business, our people – employees and bloggers – are number one. But our hosting provider is a very close second," Blake said. "From a content and traffic side, you want your audience and your bloggers to be able to get on your site at all times. Without this running smoothly, we have nothing."

The company decided that its dedicated server solution was too constraining – although they had a good idea of when volume changes were coming, they couldn't afford to wait out their hosting provider's three-day turnaround time for additional temporary servers. FanSided wanted to find a provider that could offer a stable enough infrastructure to handle their growing needs, but also a level of personal attention typically found in niche hosting providers. FanSided began the process of searching for a new hosting provider, and approached Hostway on the recommendation of a blogger who was also a current Hostway customer.
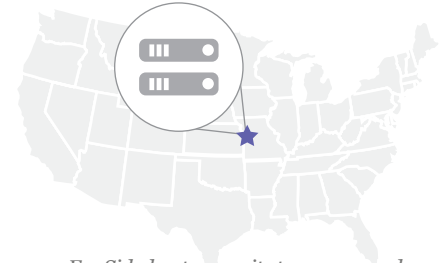
FanSided outgrows its two managed servers at another hosting company
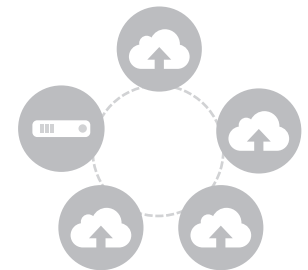
Originally signed up for one dedicated server, eight cloud nodes with Hostway, Fansided scales back to four nodes - able to scale up or down within 10 minutes

Having this new hybrid solution has made a huge difference to our operations. We're able to build infrastructure without having to think twice about what's going on in the background.

HOSTWAY
GLOBAL WEB SOLUTIONS

THE SOLUTION: MAKING THE CALL TO USE A HYBRID CLOUD INFRASTRUCTURE

Hostway paired Blake with a solutions consultant to determine what type of infrastructure would be the best fit for FanSided. Blake and the consultant agreed that the best answer would incorporate cloud technology.

After learning more about FanSided's needs, Hostway recommended a hybrid hosting platform – managed servers privately and securely linked through a VLAN connection to cloud servers so when computing resources needed to be added, it could be done in seconds, not days. It was determined that the database played a critical role in the schema, and the addition of a dedicated database server over a cloud server allowed for this increased performance metric to be met. This configuration would provide FanSided the stability they needed for their database-intensive backend – which utilized close to a thousand concurrent connections – with the additional ability to increase and decrease resources on the fly throughout the year, especially during their peak season.

"Hostway's recommendation sounded like it would address our needs," Blake said of signing up for services on a trial basis.

FanSided's migration was handled by one of Hostway's preferred channel partners, Cynch. Prior to the migration, Cynch determined that FanSided's configuration (a holdover from their former hosting partner) was overly complex and inefficient. While changing configurations is not generally part of the migration process, Cynch saw that putting in the work beforehand would make staying online and accessible easier after the transition. Adding new domains and blogs would no longer be a chore, and some prior stability issues would be fixed.

"Anytime there's a partner that can do something better than we can and it's affordable, we'll take advantage of that expertise," Blake said.

In the end, Cynch rebuilt FanSided's configuration from the ground up, greatly enhancing its operational efficiency. Cynch converted a very complex custom Nginx proxy-based configuration to a pure Apache-based solution, giving FanSided increased stability and ease of operational management.

RESULTS: FANSIDED REACHES THE GOAL LINE

FanSided joined Hostway with one dedicated server and eight cloud nodes. After launching, the company determined this infrastructure exceeded their ongoing needs, and decided to scale back to four nodes linked to the dedicated server. They are now able to scale up or down within 10 minutes and have since continued to test different configurations to determine the optimum resource level.

After FanSided's trial, they officially signed on with Hostway, citing the provider's reliability, flexibility, ease of use and customer support as their reasons for making the move.

Since signing on, the company has performed several smooth adjustments in node usage and has not experienced any decline in speed or uptime during traffic fluctuations.

"Having this new hybrid solution has made a huge difference to our operations. We're able to build infrastructure without having to think twice about what's going on in the background," said Blake. "We're expecting our traffic to double in the next few months, but with this setup, our infrastructure costs won't have to double with it."

CONCLUSION

With their hosting solution up and running, FanSided strides toward the 2012 NFL season fully prepared to serve its contributors and visitors. They found an ongoing partnership not only with Hostway, but also with Cynch, who they hired to do additional support of Apache and WordPress software on an ongoing basis. With a promising deal in the works with a major media company, FanSided looks forward to a bright future and an ever-growing footprint with Hostway.

FanSided

Hostway Hybrid Cloud Platform for Fansided

FLEXCLOUD/HYBRID NETWORK OVERVIEW

INTERNET

—— PUBLIC/INTERNET TRAFFIC
—— VPN/HYBRID FC TRAFFIC
—— DEDICATED VPN/FIREWALL
—— PUBLIC TRAFFIC
—— PRIVATE/STORAGE TRAFFIC
····· HA CONNECTION

SWITCHING LAYER

FlexCloud Environment

Dedicated Environment

FC LOADBALANCER

FC FIREWALL

VPN FIREWALL

VPN/HYBRID LINK

DELL SERVER
CLUSTER

DEDICATED
FIREWALL

VM 001
VM 002
VM 003

FLEXLINK PRIVATE VLAN

FANSIDED'S
VIRTUAL SERVERS

NETAPP STORAGE
CLUSTER

DB SERVER

HOSTWAY
GLOBAL WEB SOLUTIONS