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Mark

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Print

Seafood Auction Site **Fights Back** -- User confidence returns slowly after glitch. (Company Operations) *Jade Boyd.*

It's important for an auction site to operate smoothly if unsold products will become worthless hours after the site fails. It is especially vital if those idle products will quickly begin to smell.

This is the pressure faced daily by AuctionsConnect, which late last year launched an online auction platform for wholesale seafood vendors. The Web site suffered almost immediate connectivity problems, though it's unclear whether the site or its hosting provider, Level 3 Communications, was at fault.

Regardless of whose fault the problem was, the situation-and the fact that it took six months to win back prospective users' confidence-reinforces the need to plan every detail and to consider using redundant carriers for mission-critical connections.

Atlanta-based AuctionsConnect is a former subsidiary of Global Food Exchange, a B2B marketplace for the food industry. AuctionsConnect spent a year developing its auction software before going live in November.

The software lets buyers make online purchases from the Gloucester Seafood Display Auction. As much as 150,000 pounds of seafood are sold daily at the auction. The fish must be rushed into waiting trucks and transported to processing plants. Typically, the auction lasts only two to three hours each morning.

Fish, concentrated in lots from 1,000 pounds to as little as 12 pounds, are sold quickly during the auctions. One of the challenges in creating an online venue was the need to present bid information in a real-time fashion, said Pat Murray, director of technical operations at Auctions-Connect.

"In our auction, the price goes up one or two cents per pound every second, so if you have five seconds of outage on the network, everybody in the auction knows it," Murray said.

Global Food Exchange initially chose to host the seafood auction at a Level 3 data center in Atlanta because the price was right and the facility was nearby, Murray said.

When the site launched in late November, it wasn't a modest undertaking: Once the site went up, all bidding and sales were to be done via the Web. Buyers were trained on the new system, and computers even were set up at the Gloucester auction house for buyers who preferred to be present.

The problems cropped up on the third day. Clocks began to run slow, and some connections were dropped altogether. Murray had a dedicated T1 connection into his cabinet at Level 3, so he could see the server was operating.

After a series of frustrating starts and stops, the online auction was cancelled and buyers were asked to drive to the auction house to complete the bidding in person.

The auction software at the server hadn't been designed to automatically log users out when connections were terminated due to loss of network connectivity, Murray said. So in essence, the software server kept trying in vain to re-establish contact. The software was redesigned in December to automatically log out users after a connection was lost for several seconds, Murray said.

Fixing the problem techni-cally was minor compared to the task of regaining the goodwill of buyers in Gloucester. Murray said he ran an exhaustive test schedule, running three test auctions per day for almost six months, to prove that the system was reliable.

During testing in March, further connectivity problems arose, prompting the switch from Level 3 to a new hosting company, Inflow, a competing data center that has redundant backbone connections from three different providers. The service cost the site about $4,800 per month which is, incidentally, about $500 per month less than Level 3.

Things have worked fine since May. Some 20 to 30 bidders log onto the site, buying an average of 90,000 pounds of fish per day. Murray said two other seafood auctions have signed on to use the software.

Sites planning similar systems should consider Auctions- Connect's experience food for thought. Enterprise users should consult with their hosting provider to determine the optimal routing and consider establishing redundant, or multi-homed, connections. Users also should find out about a provider's peering agreements to make sure their traffic receives priority.

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