



AT A GLANCE:

Industry:
Commercial

Goal:
To ensure shopping cart application can handle increased holiday traffic

Challenge:
Holiday volume can exceed 185,000 orders processed per day, with the company's historic growth pushing volume up by 20 to 50 percent each year

Solution:
System load testing and monitoring with VIP and HP LoadRunner

Key Benefits:

- Discover system breaking points
- Repair deficiencies before they become a problem
- Ensure best possible customer experience under peak loads

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Wine Country Gift Baskets

VIP KEEPS ORDER PROCESSING TECHNOLOGY READY FOR PEAK HOLIDAY DEMANDS

Wine Country Gift Baskets (WCGB), a leading provider of gifts for any occasion, has seen its sales soar by as much as 20 percent per year. For the company's IT team, that means ensuring their online and in-house order processing systems can handle ever-growing traffic and avoid interruptions during the critical holiday shopping period. With testing and verification solutions by Visionary Integration Professionals (VIP), the company is able to ensure a great experience for every customer, on the Web or on the telephone, no matter how quickly the business grows.

WCGB has been manufacturing and selling value-priced, quality gift baskets to consumers and businesses for over 25 years. Its online storefront features handcrafted gift baskets filled with wines and gourmet foods. These distinctive personal and corporate gifts, along with superior customer service and a national presence, have set a new industry standard and established the company as a premier source for gift baskets for any occasion.

The Challenge

Gift baskets are a seasonal business. To remain an industry leader, the company's Website has to stand up to the seasonal onslaught of customers. WCGB makes most of its yearly revenues in the months leading up to the holidays. Holiday volume can exceed 185,000 orders in a single day, and each requires transactions to check inventory, authorize payment, and initiate shipping. Plus, based on historical results, the company's dramatic growth has meant volume increases of 20 to 50 percent annually – so even success in one year's holiday rush provides no guarantee that the systems are ready for the next. "Because we're so cyclical, having an issue even for an hour is a serious problem," said Al Niemuth, Director of E-commerce for WCGB. "We get one shot to make it."

The Solution

At the heart of WCGB's online order processing system is a shopping cart application. Its components include an HTML interface for Web customers, terminal clients used by internal customer service staff, an XML interface for large order entry, and an internal HTML Web client for seasonal team members. WCGB invests in load testing to ensure the shopping cart application is stable, responsive, and scalable to the required levels. They do

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- Al Niemuth
Director of E-commerce,
WCGB

so by conducting full-scale tests of the system at peak levels exceeding what is anticipated during the upcoming holiday season.

The company uses HP LoadRunner to test its shopping cart system. Since 2004, WCGB has been relying on the team at VIP to ensure that the application and underlying infrastructure are ready for each new holiday season. "The VIP team originally trained us on HP LoadRunner, but I felt it would be more efficient for them to come in as knowledge experts and focus on the tool, while we focused on what we're really good at," Niemuth said.

The Results

"VIP stress tests the shopping cart function, but more than that, they stress the entire IT infrastructure," Niemuth said. "We monitor resources such as I/O utilization, database usage and networking, and VIP throttles traffic up and down until we feel we have a great snapshot of what we saw in the previous year. Then we pump in 10 percent growth, then 15, and even 20 percent if that's what we're projecting. And finally, at the end of the day we turn it up until the wheels fall off, because it's important to know where the breaking point is." "We use a WCGB-licensed HP LoadRunner controller located on the WCGB network to determine how their systems would respond under different load conditions," said Jeff Bettcher, VIP's Vice President of Quality Management Sales. The project included:

- Creating real-world data for accurate system testing
- Deploying multiple traffic generators to simulate load from internal customer support agents and online customers
- Demonstrating acceptable performance at loads anticipated during the upcoming season
- Verifying database design, code updates, and hardware changes

"VIP was very astute in taking the HP LoadRunner tool and generating scripts that look like live traffic to our system," Niemuth said. "They build scripts to simulate Web shoppers or browsers, call center agents doing order entry or service, and almost two dozen more. Then they plug that into the application and we start to see in our system the kind of resource usage we see during peak season."

Niemuth added that in addition to ensuring sufficient capacity, VIP also helps verify system upgrades and changes. "We may find a deficiency in a new application or functionality," he said. "One year, we found a piece of hardware with an intermittent failure. You couldn't see that it was failing until we moved traffic across it. Had we gone forward, we would have thought everything was fine until it crashed. But instead, we were able to find and replace it and provide a great customer experience that fall."

The Partnership

Niemuth said that after several years of working together, he considers VIP a part of his own team. "I have lots of praise and kudos for VIP," he said. "Without them, there's no guarantee that we service our customers the best that we can. They're an integral part of our IT group, and when they're here, it's like having another team member onsite."

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