Portal Success Story: FlashNet

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(print version)

The customer is king in today's Internet services environment. No longer is reliable Internet access enough. Internet service providers (ISPs) must also give customers the packaged services they want, at the right price. Headquartered in Fort Worth, Texas, FlashNet serves over 244,000 residential and business customers nationwide. FlashNet experienced phenomenal growth (nearly 8,000 percent) in its first year. FlashNet attributes this growth to its complete suite of access, communications, and content solutions—and the best customer service possible. However, this success didn't come easily. It took Infranet® software from Portal to help FlashNet overcome significant hurdles to success.

Executive Summary

Challenge:

Deploy real-time billing and customer care capabilities for a rapidly expanding ISP while improving data accuracy and enabling a wide range of product packages and pricing structures.

Solution:

Deploy Infranet customer management and billing software and integrate it with vital Web services as well as back-office credit, tax, and authentication systems.

Chief Benefits:

Scalability to expand the subscriber base to millions, flexibility to tailor and deliver services to meet a wide range of customer needs, ensure rapid time to revenue with new services, avoid missed revenue opportunities by improving billing accuracy.

Growing Faster Than Its Systems

FlashNet began life in 1995 as an ISP with an internally-developed billing application. As the company began to grow, however, the application couldn't keep up. Customers were not being billed for products they purchased and services they used, creating an undesirable dent in revenue. Customer relations suffered as well, when customers called and customer care staff had incomplete data.

"We needed a carrier-class, real-time billing solution that would enable us to scale with our customer base," says Todd Wallace, Vice President of Technology for FlashNet. "Scalability was certainly a critical issue, and gaining the flexibility to support a wide range of products and pricing plans was right behind it in importance." Time to market was also essential. FlashNet was preparing for an initial public offering and the billing system had to be up to speed quickly. After evaluating multiple billing solutions, the decision came down to Portal.

Right Before Their Eyes

"What sold us was Portal's demonstration of its pricing tool," says Wallace. "Using a clean system, they created all of our pricing plans in front of us. The pricing tool gives us the ability to create products quickly and gives us an advantage in a rapidly-changing market."

Portal's Infranet also provided FlashNet with built-in integrations to critical back-end services, such as Web, email, news, a Vertex tax package, and PaymenTech credit authorization. This integration with Internet services enabled FlashNet to deploy the entire system in eight weeks, as opposed to the six-month deployment period that would have been required for competing billing solutions. FlashNet relies on Infranet as its primary billing engine and uses Infranet's administrative tool for customer-care applications. The solution runs on multiple Sun Enterprise 450 servers and an Oracle database.

Real-Time Customer Provisioning

Customers sign up for services via telephone or online via Web-based interface. Once a customer inputs basic billing information and credit card information, Infranet delivers the data to PaymenTech for credit card authorization and Equifax for credit checking. Within seconds the system then collects user name and password information and begins building the customer's specified service. Email account passwords are immediately provisioned on the email servers, Web space and an FTP password is created, an account is provisioned on the news servers, and an account is created on Infranet's Terminal Server Manager (TSM) for user authentication. Customers can begin using their new services in a flash—no waiting is necessary.

Flexibility to Meet Market Changes or Change the Market

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secret weapon. We can

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"Portal's Infranet is our secret weapon," says Wallace. "We can change pricing in minutes or bring new services to market in just a few days. It's key to our advantage in a rapidly-changing market."

Wallace explains. When a new chief marketing officer was hired, he restructured the product line and pricing structure. Using the graphical user interface (GUI)-based pricing tool, Wallace and his team recreated and tested the structure in just a few days. This flexibility enables FlashNet to respond quickly to competitive market pressures. This same flexibility also enables FlashNet to offer a wide range of products. Today's offerings include multiple packaging and pricing options for Web Hosting, ecommerce, Internet access, and DSL services—all tailored to meet specific customer needs. New products can be brought to market in hours or days. For example, FlashNet created a customer referral plan in several days—from concept to testing and launch.

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>
> **Todd Wallace** | **Vice President of Technology FlashNet**

High Data Accuracy for Improved Profitability

FlashNet also tracks account usage with Infranet. For metered accounts, usage data is made available to the customer care system, giving representatives an up-to-the-minute picture of each customer's usage. Billing accuracy has also improved, resulting in a significant decrease in billing-related customer service calls. At the same time, revenue and profitability is enhanced because customers are being billed for all of the products and services they use.

Real-time visibility into customer activity gives FlashNet a powerful tool for managing churn, projecting customer needs for new services, and eliminating non-performing products. As a result, FlashNet has been able to improve customer retention.

Enhanced Customer Care

The FlashNet customer care team uses Portal Infranet every day. With accurate data about customer activity, representatives can more quickly answer questions or resolve issues. They can also view log-in and log-out activity. For example, FlashNet offers a 30-day money-back guarantee on services. When a user calls at the end of thirty days and says he hasn't been able to log on and needs another 30 days, the log-in history is immediately available. This capability has enabled FlashNet to detect fraud and protect revenues.

Preserving Customers, Profitability, and a Leading Edge

As the company gears up to serve millions of customers nationwide, its Portal solution is a crucial component in its success. A realtime billing and customer care foundation enables FlashNet to personally address customers' needs, enhance profitability, and maintain the most desired measure of success of all—a competitive advantage.

About Portal

Portal Software® provides software to manage next-generation communications and e-services. The Infranet® software platform enables service providers to rapidly deploy new services, define optimal business models and price plans, and bill their users. Portal's software is licensed by more than three-quarters of the world's 25 top communications services companies to support wireless, broadband Internet, next-generation voice, and other e-service offerings. Portal Software employs over 1,500 people at more than 40 offices worldwide.