Consistent visibility is key to better e-commerce experience

As South African retailers move to capitalise on a rapidly expanding online shopper base, they need to ensure t[
their systems support a consistent shopping experience, or they risk losing customers...

By Wimpie van Rensburg 29 Jan 2016

© bloom.ua – 123RF.com

Online shopping is growing fast in South Africa, with recent research reports suggesting over one in five South Africans currently shop online, and between 48 and 70% expect to do so in the near future, with most of the local spend via local sites. PWC expects the value of online retail sales in South Africa to grow from R5.3 billion in 2014 to R9.5 billion by 2018

But as competition grows in the e-commerce arena, e-tailers must confront the issues that put shoppers off. According to Mastercard 2015 Online Shopping Behaviour Study, security concerns are a major inhibitor to online shopping, and virtua all customers are positively influenced by quickly-completed transactions and convenient payment methods when buying online. It goes without saying that customers also expect consistent levels of service when they buy from their chosen brands: if the bricks and mortar outlet is efficient, the same should go for the brand's e-commerce outlet. If a favourite e-tailer is convenient and secure, it should always be so, whether the customer is shopping from a mobile phone or laptop, a whether a sale is underway or not.

Behind the scenes, administrators are confronted with a complex and challenging environment needed to deliver these services. Customers connect via a plethora of devices and operating systems; a variety of payment connections must be maintained; back-end systems must cope with surges in traffic; and connectivity issues out of the control of the e-tailer ca degrade the shopping experience. In this complex environment, diagnosis and troubleshooting can be a challenge. A majo concern, particularly in peak shopping periods, is website failure, which is often the result of a number of network performance issues, such as poor change management, denial of service attacks, or simply lack of capacity on the hostir platform. Adding to the pressure is the fact that this is a competitive business, so any problems must be addressed quickly before customers become frustrated or move on to competitor sites.

Ensuring a consistent and efficient shopping experience begins with end-to-end visibility of the entire ecosystem. The e-ta must be able to track what devices users are connecting with, and from where; the time taken to complete the transaction; the number of connections involved in the transaction; where within the system the transaction is slowed; and where improvements in performance are possible.

For retailers expanding from a bricks and mortar environment into the e-commerce space, consistency in service delivery

also important. Retailers must be in a position to integrate their existing systems into their e-commerce systems and gain visibility across the entire ecosystem, to understand and control the customer experience. For new e-tailers, development and testing before launch is crucial. Here too, full visibility of the environment is necessary, to ensure all resources are performing optimally before going live.

Point solution monitoring can be useful, but only through holistic end-to-end network and application performance monitori and management is it possible to track in real-time what the customer experience is, the connection from start to finish, ho long the connection takes to work, what physical pathways it has taken, what performance is acceptable and also what is normal.

Holistic visibility enables more effective security and risk management; and makes possible proactive alerting using intellig alerting tools that set their own thresholds based on traffic patterns unique to the site, by week, day and even hour. Importantly for the customer experience, full visibility also prepares the way for better load balancing and enhanced loyalty programmes, allowing for identification of new or loyal customers and preferential treatment where necessary.

*Survey references:

- http://www.pwc.co.za/en/press-room/online-retail.jhtml
- http://newsroom.mastercard.com/mea/press-releases/online-shopping-security-in-the-spotlight-mastercard-survey/

ABOUT WIMPIE VAN RENSBURG

Wimpie van Rensburg is the country manager for sub-Saharan Africa at Riverbed Technology
View my profile and articles...