

EarthLink launches Cloud Disaster Recovery

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EarthLink has formalized a number of infrastructure-as-a-service (IaaS) options around disaster recovery (DR) and data security for customers, citing a year's worth of custom engagements that identified a trend and an opportunity for the IT services side of the house.

EarthLink's Cloud Disaster Recovery offering is composed of the following:

- IT infrastructure recovery
- Data recovery
- Database recovery
- Network service recovery
- Security recovery
- Voice

Some of the DR services are simply a function of hosting voice, security or network services with EarthLink, which can be rerouted and made redundant, or configured and turned on in the case of an on-site appliance failure. EarthLink Cloud Backup Servers already provide agent-based data backup as well, but are now part of the new portfolio. The infrastructure DR is more comprehensive and starts with EarthLink's new IaaS-capable datacenters (based on VMware) it has opened around the country in places like Rochester, San Jose and Chicago. The service is limited to Windows Server 2003/2008 environments right now, but the company plans to support Linux OSes in the future.

Customers can essentially buy time on a replication server that tracks changes made to selected on-premises servers and networks and creates a continuously updated set of machine images that can be activated on request. After setup, there is a small monthly stipend and IaaS consumption is billed when activated. EarthLink guarantees a four-hour return to operations (RTO).

This can be characterized as a virtual warm site DR scenario; IaaS techniques have made it a substantially cheaper, faster and more attractive proposition than traditional warm site recovery, which requires the lease and purchase of space and equipment, and access to trained staff. This kind of DR recovery service has become very popular thanks to the advent of on-demand infrastructure. It has a number of benefits over traditional DR that lower investment costs to nearly nothing, relatively speaking. Besides eliminating the need to maintain space and equipment, users do need to maintain duplicate software licenses; existing licenses roll over to the virtual environment.

EarthLink says that it decided to formalize the process of setting up DR sites for clients after a series of natural disasters in 2012 led to a sharp uptick of interest from

customers. It also says that data backup is usually one of the first things customers ask for, and when DR is made affordable, that is next. The service has a handful of SMB customers right now ranging from one to two servers to dozens; every DR project is a direct sales engagement, and EarthLink views it as a route to onboarding new IaaS customers as well as filling DR needs. If customers are happy with infrastructure performance in a DR scenario, the reasoning goes, they will also be more likely to pick IaaS for a technology refresh instead of on-premises servers.

Competition

Competition for virtual DR is heating up, precisely because it is so easy to implement for providers and customers alike. Large players like SunGard offer a range of virtual DR services hosted on Amazon Web Services (AWS) or in SunGard datacenters; Symantec and Xerox have 'cloud' DR products as well. Providers like Rackspace and Verizon Terremark have similar services, as do smaller hosters like Vembu, Novanis, Zero Web Hosting and others.

The 451 Take

Take EarthLink is clearly banking on an ever-improving IT services business and adding portfolio items like DR is important. Many SMB customers turn to EarthLink for IT services because they are already customers, and they have a fairly narrow set of critical needs. Historically, they wanted DR but not been able to afford it; if EarthLink makes this available on demand and at a nominal price, it will sell. In another sense, this is a go-to-market exercise that will convince more customers to use EarthLink infrastructure generally, so it is a worthy strategic service launch. EarthLink has to take care that profits and onboarding don't get bogged down in protracted, high-touch engagements, so the more this can be automated, the more successful it will be.