

## Should your enterprise outsource search?

By Stephen E. Arnold - Posted Apr 26, 2006

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Many IT professionals and Webmasters expect search to be baked into their existing applications. What's delivered is a search soufflé that disappoints.

Those responsible for Web site search are beginning to seek a foolproof recipe: enough flexibility to meet a Webmaster's demands for features, easy deployment and customization, and a range of pricing options.

Solid choices for hosted search are available from [WebSideStory](#), a public Web analytics company that purchased Atomz in May 2005; [Blossom Software](#); [Fast Search & Transfer \(FAST\)](#); and [CrownPeak](#). Each has made progress in visibility during the last 12 months.

WebSideStory will crawl your site and store your information in a remote database. When someone enters a query in the search form on your site, the WebSideStory server application receives the query, formats the results and sends them back in an HTML form with links directly to the pages on your site.

Blossom Software, which offers a similar service and some of the lowest cost solutions on the market for hosted search, is a 5-year-old company founded by a former Bell Labs scientist.

FAST, a major player in the Fortune 500 market, is coming off a record year in customer acquisition and profitability, and putting more emphasis on hosted search for 2006.

Other hosted search options are growing out of content management systems, like CrownPeak, which introduced its proprietary-hosted search solution in 2005.

Webmasters often start with the easiest path, such as presuming [Microsoft](#) has the best plan, and then moving to hosted solutions for search. Ben Vivante, Webmaster for the town of [Brookline, Mass.](#), says, "We used to use the search service that was included in the original version of Microsoft Internet Information Server [IIS]. When we upgraded IIS, the search function was changed. We did a workaround--a hack actually--to use the older IIS's search. The Blossom hosted service allowed us to free up resources for other important jobs."

Steve Kusmer, co-founder of Atomz and now senior VP of search and content solutions at WebSideStory, is one of the pioneers in hosted search. "Hosted search is simply a better way to deliver customer satisfaction," he says.

### Hosted search is for Web sites

The term "search" can be applied to many areas of a company's IT infrastructure, but hosted search is essentially a Web site search solution maintained and operated by a third party.

Hosted search is now being added to the menu of technology options in many organizations. Customers are buying. For example, Atomz (founded in 1998, now part of WebSideStory's Active Marketing Suite) and Blossom Software (founded in 2000) boast 360 and 250 customers respectively.

Curt Anderson, owner of [Municipal Web Services](#), says, "Hosted search is ideal for public facing Web sites. I'm not sure about using a hosted service behind the firewall, but the concept makes sense."

The customer gets access to a full-featured search system with such bells and whistles as categorization, query expansion, concept search and sub-second response time without the hassles of a local deployment.

Hosted search, until recently, has had a low profile. But the complexity and cost associated with managing a highly complex, specialized staff with IT generalists is winning adherents every day. [Pensions & Investments](#), a Crain Communications publication based in New York, relied on a proprietary search solution and found that it was slow and produced inaccurate results.

"We switched to the CrownPeak hosted service, and we have had nothing but positive feedback. It was the smart thing to do. There was no incremental cost to us." says David Klein, Webmaster for pionline.com.

To a Web site visitor, the hosted search solution looks like it resides on the server delivering a specific Web site. The search interface and features such as automatic query expansion have the look and feel of the hosted search licensee's Web site.

Stirring the recipe of change with Webmasters and marketers is that the features available from hosted search vendors match those available from such vendors as [Autonomy/Verity](#), [Mondosoft](#), [Endeca](#), and [Convera](#)--systems typically deployed on the licensee's own servers.

Hosted search deployment requires less time than delivering Web site search with the [Google Appliance](#) or the [Thunderstone Search Appliance](#).

The hosted search solution requires almost no setup and configuration characteristic of the search solutions included with the Microsoft SharePoint server or an [Oracle](#) database installation.

"Search is an application that needs constant attention," says Bjorn Laukli, FAST's senior VP of Solution & Customer Services, "More and more system administrators are discovering the complexity and infrastructure challenges."

Five years ago, FAST introduced its Managed Care Hosting Service. Laukli says, "Customers want a good search experience without the overhead that comes from deploying a new service themselves. We are specialists in search, and most of our customers have many other applications to support. Besides applying search best practices, we provide the best hosted practices from many years in the industry." The diagram on page 10, KMWorld May 2005, Vol 15 #5, illustrates that indexing, query processing, relevance ranking and results generation occur on the hosted search vendor's server. The licensee of a hosted search solution receives the request for a document and then delivers the requested content to the user. Hosted search vendors deliver second or sub-second response time, handle mirroring, index updating and managing an infrastructure tailored to deal with the spikes in demand that go hand-in-hand with search.

### **Outsourced market**

Outsourcing, according to the market research unit of [IDC](#), generated revenues of about \$533 billion in 2005 and is likely to grow at about 7 percent a year through 2009.

Estimates prepared by ArnoldIT.com for CMSWatch's *Enterprise Search Report* in June 2005 put the worldwide search market at \$1.5 billion worldwide in 2004. Hosted search represents less than 15 percent of that amount, according to Dennis Jacobi, a partner at [Quantum International](#) who worked on the market estimate for the second edition of the report. He adds, "Hosted search is small today, probably in the \$200 million range and growing at 15 percent per year."

Jacobi adds, "There's definitely growth ahead for hosted search because outsourcing is growing and more companies are discovering that operating their own Web site search system is not a judicious use of scarce IT resources."

The acquisition of Atomz points to the interest in hosted search add-ons for content management companies and the like. Atomz was snapped up last year by WebSideStory for \$4.3 million in cash and 3.1 million shares. In fact, Blossom Software, CrownPeak and FAST reported that interest in their hosted search solutions is gaining strength.

### **Breaking free: bringing flexibility to search**

Why the growing interest in hosted search? Consider Municipal Web Services, a company focused on providing Web support and services to city, state and national governments. With more than 60 sites to maintain, MuniWeb needed flexibility. "Many of our clients," says Municipal Web Services' Anderson, "make frequent use of acronyms such as FOIA for Freedom of Information Act. Our basic search engine located documents when the user searched for the exact phrase, but missed many documents where the common acronym was used.

"I was contacted in 2000 by Alan Feuer, [CTO] of Blossom Software," Anderson says. "He explained that he could operate search from his servers and define synonyms so a user searching for 'freedom of information act' would get results that only used 'FOIA.' We've been working with Blossom ever since. Most important, Blossom keeps adding features, often without our having to ask for them."

The basic IIS search engine also does not index PDF documents, a format used more frequently now than ever by local governments, according to Anderson. "It's critical that our clients' users be able to search on the content of PDF documents." He says.

Anderson's experience is echoed by Kusmer of WebSideStory, "We talk about 'customer love.' Hosted search is all about meeting customer needs for a better search system," he says. "Our focus on search delivers advanced features, with no downtime, no hassles with software upgrades and fixes. Our customers can focus on their Web sites and leave the nuances of search to our specially trained engineers."

### **Controlling content: boosting stories**

Klein, of pionline.com, faced a different challenge. He notes, "Our former search engine was not too useful for many reasons. But the big problem was that we were not providing accurate and relevant search results. CrownPeak showed us its new search system. We had more control over the search algorithm and better search engine reporting. The search engine reporting enables us to monitor how people use our Web site, while the customization of the search engine algorithm makes sure our users can successfully find what they are looking for. The combination of these two features allows us to provide our online readers with the best possible online experience."

Content control is a coveted feature in FAST and WebSideStory. Feuer of Blossom Software says, "Webmasters have to master many applications. Hosted services like Blossom's provide on-the-fly summarization, query expansion, content boosting and many other advanced search features to improve the quality of the search experience easily and without having to invest hours of research to figure out how to make search better for users."

### **Know thy user**

WebSideStory provides search to high-traffic sites like Bloomingdales, Victoria's Secret, Verizon Wireless, the Walt Disney Co., and more than 350 other organizations worldwide. Kusmer says, "Web analytics drive search relevancy." WebSideStory packages advanced Web site traffic analysis with its search system. "The payoff is that a customer can tell what content should be made more accessible, where users are having trouble finding information and determining what information is going to keep a Web site visitor coming back," Kusmer says.

Analytics plays an important part in FAST's hosted service. Laukli says, "We deliver a full range of Web site traffic reports. We identify which pages are causing a user to abandon a site. A Webmaster can use this information along with word and phrase analyses and referrer data to optimize a site for indexing by Google or Yahoo and improve the design of the site."

Instead of an IT professional figuring out a weblog, hosted search companies make analysis easy and quick. Blossom Software e-mails usage reports to each of its customers every week. CrownPeak provides a Web form for each customer where information is a click away.

### **What's the downside?**

Hosted search may sound like the panacea to solve the "find it" problem, but is it almost too good to be true? Hosted search does show up as a bright spot in a landscape known for its cost pitfalls, mind-boggling complexity and hundreds of arcane weighting and tuning options. And there is often the almost insatiable appetite for CPU cycles and bandwidth with search implementation onsite. So outsourcing, at first blush, does make good sense.

Surprisingly, security--the blood chilling vulnerability of an organization's data and systems to attack--is not a concern for hosted Web site search. The Web search services index a public facing Web site. Kusmer explains, "Hosted search offers better security, better uptime and a more stable system than most local search installations. The reason is that WebSideStory does one thing well and spreads the cost of best practices across our client base."

"The issue is not just saving money," says Rob Rose, CrownPeak's VP of sales and marketing, "Outsourcing frees up time, eliminates fiddling with plumbing and delivers a reliable, flexible service." Hosted search costs will continue to be commoditized as popularity rises. Still, the more popular play these days has been the Google Appliance. Cost ratios will continue to feed boardroom discussions on what to do. Blossom Software's services for small Web sites can cost as low as \$240 per year. Other players are racing to have low-end offerings as well.

Typical prices for larger Web sites are in the \$15,000 to \$20,000 per year range.

Laukli of FAST notes, "Customers who want special features such as the ability to handle multiple languages understand that this type of enhanced service boosts the costs somewhat."

### **Should you outsource Web site search?**

Hosted search has risen to being a value in a market with costly, cumbersome solutions for Webmasters. The facts seem to indicate that hosted search is poised to become a more important option for many Webmasters.

Laukli underscores the growth of the industry by reporting the uptick in his own organization. "FAST is now building a second data center on the West Coast as a disaster recovery option for its hosted customers," he says. "Also, the Boston hosting facility will be expanded to meet sales demand. Data center planning is also underway in Asia to meet our growth in that market."

Blossom Software, CrownPeak and WebSideStory tell similar stories. "We're seeing a steady stream of inquiries," says Rose. "CrownPeak offers search; compatibility with third-party applications; and our own pre-configured, pre-integrated and fully managed Web site analytics service options, as well as full integration with leading analytics packages."

But the best reason may be the one offered by Stuart Schram, Web engineer for the [Threat Open Source Information Gateway](#), a specialized information service for police and other first responders. "We use Blossom's search," he says. "It's fast, navigates our challenge response system, does on-the-fly abstracts of documents, highlights query terms and has never gone down in three years."

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### **Solid Choices for Hosted Search**

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Company Blossom Software

URL [www.blossom.com](http://www.blossom.com)

Starting Price \$240/year

Special Features Synonym expansion, real-time index updates, query term highlighting. Supports enterprise and intranet search.

Representative Clients Municipal Web Services, San Diego Natural History Museum, NOAA

Company CrownPeak

URL [www.crownpeak.com](http://www.crownpeak.com)

Starting Price \$15,000/year

Special Features Customized search results, relevance ranking, integrated Web analytics

Representative Clients Hyundai Motors, Hospital Corporation of America, State of Virginia, Crain Communications

Company Fast Search & Transfer (FAST)

URL [www.fastsearch.com](http://www.fastsearch.com)

Starting Price \$20,000/year

Special Features Faceted searching, automatic categorization of documents, ability to handle billions of documents

Representative Clients Elsevier Science, Vodafone, UPS, Accona

Company WebSideStory

URL [www.websidestory.com](http://www.websidestory.com)

Starting Price \$15,000/year

Special Features Customized search results, tight integration of advanced Web analytics and search, support for public Web site access and self-service customer support

Representative Clients Bloomingdales, Brooks Brothers, Verizon Wireless, Walt Disney, Victoria's Secret