

# TURNING UP THE POWER OF BLOGGING

*How Six Apart Brings The World A Few Degrees Closer Together*

*Have you read a blog today? There's a fair chance Six Apart had something to do with it — either hosting the blog, or providing the platform it's built on, or dispatching the ad you saw in the sidebar. Founded in 2001, Six Apart is one of the leading blogging companies, powering some of the Internet's most influential blogs and Web sites, and managing and serving up huge volumes of data on a daily basis. Benchmark recently talked with Six Apart Director of Operations Abe Hassan about blogging, bloggers and their readers, and the performance challenges of keeping millions of conversations going.*

**Benchmark:** First off, please tell us a little bit about your background with Six Apart and your role there.

**Abe Hassan:** I've been at Six Apart for about four years in various capacities. I'm currently the director of ops here at Six Apart. Our focus in Operations is not just insuring uptime, not just insuring speed, but also making sure that we're doing that as effectively and as optimally as possible.

**Benchmark:** Can you give us a rundown of your various products, the targets for each, and how they fit into your overall strategy?

**Abe Hassan:** Six Apart is a blogging company. We offer products that serve all the needs of bloggers and their readers. Some people want a platform to publish things. Some people want a hosted platform. Some people want a platform to communicate with friends. Some people want the latest news. The goal is to reach out to every demographic so that there's something for everybody.

We want to bring people into the blogosphere, to bring organizations into the blogosphere. And we have a number of products that satisfy their various needs.

**Benchmark:** What are those different products and how do they fit together?

**Abe Hassan:** We have TypePad, which is our hosted product. TypePad is used by a lot of big companies, by a lot of professionals who want to share what they're doing, share what they have to say. We're building more and more features into TypePad to provide for that engagement so that people can find content that they're interested in, so that people can share their content with Facebook and Twitter, and so that they can get more readers.

Movable Type is a licensed product. People install it on their own set of servers and manage it. It's basically a content management system, and you can manage blogs or even your entire Web site with it. That's the need that Movable Type covers.

Vox is built as more of a friends and family kind of thing, where people cannot just follow other people, but read what other people are doing, share their picture posts, share their content with a close circle of friends — with friends and family as we like to say.

**Benchmark:** Six Apart also has an advertising program?

**Abe Hassan:** We refer to that as our 'media business.' Our Media team allows for bloggers to make money. Folks who are interested in taking their blogs to the next level, can take advertising on their blogs. And we have the opportunity for larger organizations — advertisers — to reach the wide community of people on our platforms.

We grow the community by having people find what they're interested in, which in turn feeds back into new user acquisitions which continues to grow the community — it's a kind of positive feedback loop.

I do want to point out that people are free to put advertising on their TypePad blogs — they don't have to go through our ad program. We give full control to the blogger. But our ad program has a fairly wide reach, and people who have been in the ad program have had a lot of success with it.

**Benchmark:** Looking at Vox for a minute, it's not an atypical blogging platform, but the users are controlling access to it. Is that how it gets to be a 'friends and family' kind of thing?

**Abe Hassan:** Yes. One of the most popular features on Vox is that you can protect items so that you're only sharing them with your friends and family and they're not completely public. That's one of the draws of Vox.

**Benchmark:** Do you publish any of your numbers in terms of traffic? Can you give us a sense of Six Apart's scale?

**Abe Hassan:** Just in terms of reach, we look at the entire Six Apart network, which includes the reach of our media program, which reaches into TypePad, which reaches into Vox, which even reaches

into blogs that aren't hosted by us or aren't using our product, but use our ad network. And that reach I think is pretty impressive. The comScore numbers showed about 75 million unique U.S. visitors in December of 2009.

So the reach there is pretty impressive. The page views are in the billions — I think the number is 2.3 billion page views on the Internet have had something to do with Six Apart. That's the reach of our overall network. That's our ad network.

But we're not just an ad provider. We try to integrate everything together so that people who view Six Apart ads may get pulled back into TypePad.

**Benchmark:** What about TypePad specifically?

**Abe Hassan:** We had about 30 million page views in the U.S. through TypePad — that's also December of 09.

**Benchmark:** Tell us about your competitive landscape. Who are your primary competitors?

**Abe Hassan:** The thing that I think is exciting about what we're doing is that we don't have a one-to-one competitor. WordPress definitely is a competitor from the sense of blog services, but that's only a part of our business.

We're a full service blog company, which means we'll provide the blogging software, we'll provide the hosting, we can utilize our ad network so that people who want to profit from their blogs can do so.

We have social media features more and more these days, so that people can share their information with Facebook, with Twitter. We have mobile features — people can post by email and they can post pictures from their iPhones.

We have public APIs so that people can build applications on top of TypePad. And so it's really a big combination of factors. There are a bunch of components that build into what we consider 'a full service blogging company.' And with every component there's a different competitor.

The thing that is compelling about Six Apart is that we serve all of a blogger's needs — getting them connected to other people, getting their word out, getting feedback from their readership.

Whether it's somebody who just wants to talk about what they're doing every day, whether it's somebody who wants to build their business on top of TypePad — we have a lot of professional bloggers — or whether it's a big company that wants to engage with their customers on TypePad — Wells Fargo is one example.

**Benchmark:** Can you tell us a little bit about your data infrastructure? You're serving up a lot of data every day.

**Abe Hassan:** Yes. We run and manage everything ourselves. We've got a couple hundred servers that power our properties. Alexa lists us as one of the top 100 sites in the US, and we make sure to do everything we can to ensure site availability and performance, all while keeping costs down.

**Benchmark:** Can you talk a little bit about how you monitor the performance of your data network and make sure that you're being competitive in terms of getting content onto people's screens? And how Keynote fits in?

**Abe Hassan:** We use [Keynote](#) to monitor external availability. We want to make sure that our services are up and stable. Keynote gives us the ability to have an external view on things. We can see how we're performing throughout the U.S., throughout various times of day and night. We don't rely only on Keynote for monitoring; we have a good deal of internal monitoring, using Nagios to monitor various pieces of our deployment.

But Keynote gives us a view that we don't really have just from monitoring things ourselves. It's a more holistic view — how fast is this page being served, what is the effect of all the images that are on these pages, all the style sheets, all the JavaScript? How does that effect the page load time? Those are views that we get out of Keynote.

**Benchmark:** Do you have Keynote monitoring for you continuously?

**Abe Hassan:** Keynote is monitoring our systems 24/7. It runs a measurement every 30-45 seconds or so. We monitor TypePad, Vox, our ad service, basically all our external properties. It's a constant thing. We rely on Keynote as an external barometer to tell us when something isn't running smoothly.

We know, based off of our experiences and the experiences of many other companies, that people respect speed. When a Web site is slow, even a couple of seconds, people notice that, and that has an effect on our success as a service.

**Benchmark:** Do you use Keynote's measurement agents throughout the world or are you primarily focused on the U.S.?

**Abe Hassan:** We do use the agents throughout the world. We have a readership base in Europe, in Japan, and in other parts of the world, and it's important to us to know if they're having problems getting to Six Apart's sites, even if it's not degraded for folks in the U.S.

**Benchmark:** You offer something called the TypePad Cloud Platform. Can you tell us a little bit about that?

**Abe Hassan:** We're in the business of providing bloggers, whether it's people or organizations, what they need to become successful. One of the things that we think is really important is giving people the ability to use their content however they want to. We provide a blogging service that's very well defined — but some people want to do something a little bit more without the overhead of managing that content themselves.

So we provide TypePad APIs, which people can hook into. It gives people the ability to use our service as the backend, and then on top of that they can build a lot of things. They can build community Web sites. They can build blogs of their own. They can use their data however they want basically, without being restricted to using TypePad proper. The APIs are continually under development. We're adding new features constantly.

So again, it's one prong of the approach that we take. We want to provide options for people to become successful, and we think that providing people the ability to get at their data and to use that to build on top of — that is important as well.

**Benchmark:** Tell us a little about your ad services and how you make sure they're performing up to par.

**Abe Hassan:** Our ad servers take an incoming request and hand it off to our partnering ad providers, who then serve the ads themselves. My team is responsible for maintaining the ad servers that we run, and then we have an ad ops team that focuses on performance beyond that.

We know and they know that speed matters. If the ad is slowing up the page, people are going to turn on ad block and just outright stop seeing any ads at all. So we all know that it's important to be zippy, which is an ever-increasing struggle within the ad world, but hopefully that's a trend — that people are recognizing that fast is good.

**Benchmark:** Okay. Switching gears then. You mentioned mobile earlier. Tell us more about Six Apart and mobile.

**Abe Hassan:** We have a couple of things that we do for mobile interaction. We have a TypePad application in the iPhone App Store. We have features on TypePad that provide for better mobile interaction — like post by email, which is a pretty popular feature. People can just send emails from their phones with pictures, with text, with whatever, and get the contents posted that way.

**Benchmark:** And you mentioned that you had some functionality built into Movable Type to affect its display on mobile devices.

**Abe Hassan:** Yes, there are plug-ins for Movable Type that optimize for mobile viewing. For TypePad, some of our newer designs are optimized for mobile interaction.

**Benchmark:** In some places you're calling TypePad a microblogging service. That's a term usually associated with things like Twitter. How does that fit in?

**Abe Hassan:** It seems like there's a pretty wide divide between "blogging", which a lot of people see as a very heavy operation, something that requires a significant time investment. And then we have things like Twitter on the other end, where all you need to do is post a sentence or two. And we see microblogging as a bridge between the two. It's lightweight, and it's a good way for folks to get into blogging. There's significant emphasis within the product to making this easy, to simplifying the compose screen, to making it easy to post quick excerpts from other articles online, that sort of thing. There are no size limits in terms of how long the post can be, but we don't make people feel overwhelmed.

**Benchmark:** So 'micro' isn't really referring to the size of the post — no 140 character limit.

**Abe Hassan:** People refer to Twitter as a microblog, people refer to Tumblr and Posterous as microblogs. We can do that. We can provide the services that Tumblr provides, that Twitter provides, but we have to show people that blogging isn't scary. We have to show that anyone can be a blogger if they want to be a blogger. They can use our services for that.

And the nice thing about our services is that there's a clear path for growth. What happens if they become bigger? What happens if they want to seriously invest in their blog? What happens if they want to make money off their blog? And we have answers for all of that.

**Benchmark:** You talked earlier a little bit about how you're integrating Facebook and Twitter feeds. Is that functionality available throughout your products?

**Abe Hassan:** The social features are primarily built into TypePad at this point, but it ties back to the overall principle that we want to help people succeed. Part of that is social media optimization — getting people's posts propagated to Facebook, to Twitter, and driving traffic back from Facebook and Twitter to their blog, and giving people a sense of what that traffic looks like, so that people know what the impact is of sharing their posts with Twitter or with Facebook.

So there definitely is a very strong emphasis on social media optimization. Instead of treating individual blogs as an island, bloggers and readers can tap into social media to find content that they're interested in.

**Benchmark:** So do you have tools available that show an individual what kind of traffic they're getting from Facebook and Twitter and the other social sites?

**Abe Hassan:** Basically, when people post to Twitter, to Facebook, that traffic goes through Bit.ly, and we have dashboards built into TypePad that hook into Bit.ly's information to show how many clicks you got through Facebook through TypePad or Facebook and Twitter. There are also other views into referrer information, pageviews, etc. that we provide.

**Benchmark:** What technologies do you think are going to have the biggest impact as Six Apart moves forward?

**Abe Hassan:** There's a fairly strong trend both on the engineering side and the operations side for moving to things that are lightweight, that are more efficient, that are just plain optimized. We see it from the operations side; we're buying servers that use less power but are 15 times more capable of doing the work that we want. To us as operations people — bigger hard drives, beefier machines, faster CPUs — that sort of trend to us in ops is exciting because it means we can decrease our footprint and be a lot more efficient about how we're doing it. We decrease our footprint despite the company growing. That's a great position to be in.

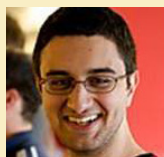
Some of the other technologies that I've seen people get excited about are applications that are built for Web scale, where you can serve 2,000 requests a second, or an application that can handle 80,000 concurrent connections. We're seeing more and more of that, and I think that's hand-in-hand with ops optimization, and really provides for a very streamlined deployment overall.

**Benchmark:** So where do you see Six Apart a year from now, three years from now, five years from now? Where do you think you're going to be? Or where is it you want to be?

**Abe Hassan:** I really am excited about the direction that we're all taking at Six Apart. I continue to overuse this phrase but I really do think that the idea of a full service blogging company is exciting.

We provide everything for someone to be a reader, a commenter, a blogger, a community leader — the entire range. And as we grow more and more into that, as we expand the reach of our overall Six Apart network, that feeds into the momentum. I like to think of us as 'the blogging company,' and everything we do reflects that we're a company that provides for anything related to blogging. That's the track that we're on.

**Benchmark:** And an ambitious and worthy track it is. Thank you, Abe, and good luck!



**Abe Hassan**  
Director of Operations, Six Apart

Abe Hassan is director of operations for Six Apart, responsible for the uptime of Six Apart's extensive data infrastructure and networks. His team is focused on continuous improvements in efficiency, site reliability, and performance, while keeping a sharp eye on costs. Abe has worked with Six Apart since before he graduated from college, most notably with LiveJournal, one of the oldest journaling services on the Internet and a precursor to modern blogging, which was formerly owned by Six Apart. Abe holds a B.S. in Computer Engineering from the University of Illinois at Champaign.