

Ask (formerly known as AskJeeves)

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Impact Highlights:

- Phenomenal growth placed significant stress on the Web site's infrastructure.
- Ask needed accurate, impartial site performance data.
- Keynote data helped ensure users get the performance they expect.

Keynote Helps Ask to Consistently Respond to Online Inquiries

For people tired of trying to frame a web search in precise Boolean terms, Ask is a breath of fresh air. Operating since mid-1997, Ask is essentially an online question and answer clearing house that lets users type in a simple English query such as "Where can I find the lowest air fares from San Francisco to New York?" and get back a short list of relevant Web sites that they can visit to find the answer. In addition to its consumer services, Ask derives a significant portion of its business by providing back-end knowledge base services that facilitate e-commerce for clients such as Compaq, Dell, Martha Stewart, Microsoft and Toshiba. Customers visiting those sites can ask questions like "What do I need to upgrade to Windows 2000?" or "Where can I buy Compaq computers in San Jose?"



The Challenge: Keeping Up with User Demand

As a result of its leadership in simple language Web queries, Ask has experienced phenomenal growth. Beginning with only 3,000 questions per day in its first month of operation, Ask answered about 2.5 million questions each day in December 1999. The number of users has also grown from 425,000 in September 1998 to well over 4 million in late 1999. This volume of traffic places significant stress on a Web site's infrastructure, and requires constant vigilance against performance degradation, the bane of any online business.

To keep information moving and ensure a positive user experience, Ask has built a fault-tolerant infrastructure that features massive back-end processing horsepower. Its two Web hosting providers—Exodus and GlobalCenter—now house more than 50 custom-built "Wintel" architecture Web servers from Acma, along with load and site balancing equipment by F-5. High performance switching equipment speeds queries into the Ask knowledge base, and users get answers in seconds. While performance is the defining issue for any Internet-based business, it's

also a personal issue to MIS and Site Operations director Richard Hartman. "My job is riding on it and, as they say in the cab business, you're only as good as your last shift," he says. Hartman's need for accurate, impartial site performance data led him to Keynote shortly after he joined Ask in late 1998.

The Solution: Keynote Keeps the Information Flowing

Hartman hired Keynote in early 1999 and the company's Internet performance measurement service, Keynote, demonstrated its value almost immediately. "Things had begun to slow down considerably during peak periods, but pinpointing performance bottlenecks is usually like looking for a needle in a haystack," Hartman says.

"Fortunately, the Keynote data allowed us to trace our problems directly to the hubs we were using at the time. We replaced the hubs with switches and, within an hour, Keynote measurements showed that response times had dropped dramatically." Keynote now measures Internet performance on many Ask URLs. Hartman uses that data to fine-tune performance and plan future capacity, but he also finds it useful in a variety of other ways. "Because they have over 300 measurement computers strategically placed in over 95 locations around the world, Keynote helps us overcome geographical differences in performance data and determine what we need to do to assure a quality experience for everyone, regardless of where they're located," Hartman says. Ask also uses Keynote Perspective measurements as a strategic business tool. "Before we enter into a business relationship with any company, I start monitoring their URLs to see if their performance is as good as they say it is," Hartman

says. "Keynote is the Swiss embassy of measurement services. It eliminates human subjectivity and just gives me hard numbers." "We also like to see how our ad server is affecting performance," Hartman says. "I use Perspective Full Page and Benchmark services to measure our home page download time with and without ads. If there's a disparity and the ad server is slowing things down for our users, we can either get them to correct the problem immediately or take them offline until they do. Either way, Keynote data helps make sure that our users get the performance they expect."

The Result: High Performance and Return on Investment

According to Hartman, perhaps the most graphic illustration of Keynote's value-add occurred when Ask was considering adding an East Coast Web site hosting facility. "We commissioned Keynote's Professional Services group to conduct an audit to determine, among other things, if a Virginia-based site would improve things," Hartman says. "They found that an East Coast site would only result in a 2-to-3 percent performance gain, which wouldn't justify the cost of the servers, rack space and personnel to set it up and maintain it. I really didn't expect to hear that; I was already resigned to setting the thing up." "To top it off, Keynote even showed me how to get that same 2-to-3 percent performance gain by simply tweaking some settings on our existing systems, which cost me a phone call to the South Bay," he adds. "Overall, we spent \$10,000 on an audit that saved us at least \$100,000." Hartman also likes Keynote's customer service policies. "They take good care of us," he says.

"I have them change the URLs they measure from time to time. They make the modifications for me and reply the next day by e-mail. Very efficient, no hassles. This is just one more way Keynote is helping Ask stay on top of the online Q&A business."

About Keynote

Keynote Systems (NASDAQ "KEYN") is the global test and measurement company for mobile communications and online business performance.

As an independent and trusted third-party, Keynote provides IT and marketing executives with an unbiased view into their Internet services from around the world. For over a decade, we have been providing measurement data and testing capabilities that allow companies to understand and improve their customer's online and mobile experience.

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