



AlertSite: A Proven Alternative for Web Monitoring

Executive Summary

No matter what their industry, today's enterprises face two critical challenges in the current economic climate: capturing customers and retaining their business. To meet these critical challenges, many enterprises are investing more heavily than ever in Internet applications that can both attract new business and act as a medium for service delivery. For these enterprises, Internet application performance has become synonymous with business performance.

As a result of this expanding dependence on Internet services, enterprises are also changing their approach to applications management. While previous performance measurement tools focused primarily on data center-based views of IT infrastructure availability and response time, today's enterprises require real-time monitoring of their Internet services down to the browser level, both inside and outside of the firewall. To improve their success in capturing and retaining customers, businesses must be able to measure and evaluate the end user's experience as it occurs.

From an IT perspective, this need for data on the end-user experience means a shift in monitoring and management strategy. In the past, IT departments benchmarked application performance primarily through historical analysis of server and network performance, often using sophisticated, computing-intensive agents designed to collect data on the entire application infrastructure. Today, however, IT organizations are searching for the means to benchmark the performance of a business service in real time, as the end user views it. Essentially, the key metrics for evaluating application performance has changed from historical response time to real-time quality of experience (QoE).

Unfortunately, the tools that IT departments have traditionally used internally for managing applications cannot provide the type of real-time, end-user-focused data that is now required in today's Internet service environments. Complex agents and sophisticated, device-oriented management tools cannot practically be extended to customers and end users that operate beyond the enterprise domain. To gain the proper insight on Internet service performance and end-user experience, many enterprises now are turning to third-party service providers that can cost-efficiently and objectively measure applications behavior from the customer's point of view.

In this report, we take a closer look at one of the leading providers of end-user experience management services: AlertSite, which supplies e-business performance data to thousands of enterprises worldwide. Following a thorough investigation of the AlertSite service and interviews with several of its largest users, Enterprise Management Associates (EMA) offers this evaluation of the AlertSite service, its capabilities, and its potential to meet the needs of today's increasingly Internet-dependent enterprise.

Service Description

Founded in 1998 in Boca Raton, FL, AlertSite has been in operation for nearly six years and has been profitable since 1999, which is impressive given current economic conditions. Unlike some of its chief competitors, which began as software companies or internal applications management tool vendors, AlertSite has always been a service provider focused on the real-time management of end-user experience.

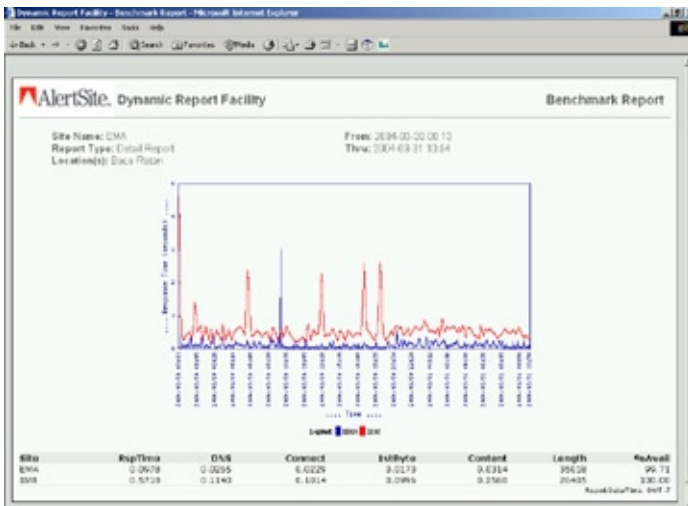
AlertSite's goal is simple – to help enterprises improve customers' satisfaction with their Web experience. By providing the means to let IT organizations see their Web applications as end users do, AlertSite enables corporations to reduce Web site and shopping cart abandonment while streamlining their site performance and operations. The value proposition is clear: improve users' Web experience, and more prospects and return customers will come to your door.

AlertSite offers a wide variety of features and services under its product umbrella, but these all fall into one of four product categories: measurement, diagnostics, notification, and reporting.

- **Measurement.** AlertSite tests Web sites, servers, and applications as often as once per minute from a series of locations maintained across the globe. Performance metrics are collected for every component of each interaction, providing visibility into how the different parts of the Web infrastructure are responding. Measurements are collected for DNS resolution, TCP connect, time to first byte, HTML content, redirect times, and total response time. AlertSite also offers optional full-page monitoring that provides detailed timings for each object on a particular Web page.
 - **Diagnostics.** In addition to its sophisticated monitoring capabilities, AlertSite offers a five-step diagnostic process that identifies error conditions, confirms their existence, and classifies them to aid in troubleshooting. Server responses can be included with notification emails, and TCP traceroutes are automatically issued to help diagnose network problems. Administrators can execute on-demand diagnostic tests at any time via a single control panel.
 - **Notification.** Once errors have been verified, AlertSite has the ability to distinguish the severity based on duration and notify the appropriate parties based on pre-established policies and practices. Notifications can be delivered by e-mail, pager, SMS messages, or telephone calls.
 - **Reporting.** The AlertSite service aggregates and distills response and availability data into reports that help enterprises improve performance, pinpoint problem areas and infrastructure weaknesses, and respond to problems before they affect site availability. Detailed performance metrics can be displayed in a variety of formats, and daily, weekly, and monthly summaries are automatically distributed to the appropriate users. Benchmark reporting allows comparison of any monitored sites to any of AlertSite's benchmarked sites.
- Unlike some of its competitors, AlertSite conducts site testing from locations all over the globe. The company currently has thirteen monitoring stations, including six in major U.S. cities as well as locations in Europe, Asia, Australia, and Canada.
- From a functional perspective, AlertSite offers four categories of services, enabling the enterprise to select the ones that best align with their IT goals and Internet service objectives.
- **Availability monitoring.** AlertSite offers round-the-clock availability monitoring services to help enterprises gauge the availability of Web sites, servers, and/or Internet-connected devices. Connectivity errors are verified from three different backbone networks and an alert is sent to the appropriate parties via e-mail, pager, SMS message, or phone call. This service is the simplest and lowest-cost of the AlertSite offerings, starting at just \$4.95 per URL per month.
 - **Performance monitoring.** For enterprises that want a complete picture of how their sites are performing, AlertSite offers Performance Professional plans, a set of services that tests each Web site from outside the firewall to gauge end-user experience. Performance Pro tests Web sites simultaneously from multiple locations around the globe, and can break down Web pages by objects, to show the impact of each object on performance. Reports offer a detailed analysis of site performance, including DNS resolution time, TCP connect time, time to first byte, content download time, and redirect times. The service starts at \$9.95 per URL per month.
 - **Web transaction monitoring.** For some enterprises, the key metric is the performance of a specific application or process that is crucial to the business. For these enterprises, AlertSite offers Web Transaction Professional, which measures the performance of specific Web transactions on the site. Through a simple software download, enterprises can record the specific transactions to be monitored, and AlertSite will thereafter provide a detailed analysis of transaction performance to show how critical applications are responding.
 - **Service level monitoring.** One of the newest features available from AlertSite is their SLA Manager. It offers the ability to define specific service level objectives, operating periods and exclusions. Once defined, service compliance for uptime, availability and response time can easily be reported. This capability is particularly attractive to enterprises that wish to do service level management, either as a means of guaranteeing performance to customers or as a means of benchmarking IT performance. While there

are competitors that offer availability, performance, and/or transaction monitoring services, very few competitors offer service level monitoring features.

Figure 1: Example AlertSite Report



In December of 2003, AlertSite added a security scanning capability, a service that helps enterprises identify and protect their sites against known hacker threats. AlertSite customers can choose to purchase services that audit their sites for potential vulnerabilities and then certify the site's safety when all of the vulnerabilities have been eliminated. This certification helps reassure customers that their data is secure and encourages repeat business. AlertSite recently announced a partnership to add Web load-testing to their portfolio of services. In keeping with AlertSite's philosophy of helping customers be successful, this is a unique service offering a consultative experience with very reasonable costs.

AlertSite User Experiences

In an effort to gain additional insight into the practical application of the AlertSite services, Enterprise Management Associates conducted interviews with several major AlertSite users. While the users had significantly different applications for the services, and different viewpoints on AlertSite's strengths and weaknesses, they were nearly uniform in their praise for AlertSite's support and its cost/value proposition. The following is a synopsis of two of those interviews.

Customer 1: Business-to-Business E-commerce Provider

A major provider of e-business exchange services turned to AlertSite one year ago when it encountered performance disparities on its Web portal in different geographic regions.

While the provider was using several tools to measure applications and infrastructure performance, IT administrators still could not understand why users in the United Kingdom were reporting slow response times while U.S. users were getting good performance. The provider needed the means to measure performance from outside the firewall, from multiple geographic locations across the globe.

After evaluating several alternatives, the e-commerce service provider chose AlertSite. The AlertSite service not only enabled the provider to diagnose and rectify its immediate performance problems, but also supplied key data to help tune the site's performance. Today, the e-commerce provider is using AlertSite not only to tune performance on a routine basis, but it also relies on AlertSite data to aid in site troubleshooting, error notification, and recovery in the event of problems.

"AlertSite's value proposition is quite compelling, compared with the larger competitors," said an executive at the e-commerce service provider. In fact, he said that AlertSite is providing critical data on services that account for 60% of the provider's business, at a cost of barely \$10,000 a year.

While the e-commerce service provider is generally very satisfied with AlertSite, there could be more out-of-the-box capabilities, the executive said. AlertSite engineers must sometimes be called in to set up new scripts to measure specific transactions, he noted. AlertSite is expected to launch additional out-of-the-box capabilities later this year.

Customer 2: Public Electric Utility

A large public electric utility offers a look at the other end of AlertSite's customer spectrum. The \$8 billion utility doesn't have a Web-centric business, but it does maintain many different Web sites that play important roles in its day-to-day business. Some of these sites are customer-facing vehicles that provide data to the public; others are internal sites that facilitate the internal operations of the utility. In each case, the AlertSite service has enabled the utility's IT staff to optimize site performance, and provide performance data to upper-level executives.

The utility has used AlertSite to help diagnose slow transaction times and respond to user complaints about response time. Simulated transactions help IT administrators replicate the end-user experience and troubleshoot performance issues with specific transaction types. In addition, the utility has used AlertSite to collect end-to-end performance data that was not available through internal management applications.

"What was attractive was the end-to-end metrics," said an IT executive at the utility. Infrastructure-focused tools only told part of the story, he noted. "The server could be spinning away, but the application might be completely unavailable." The AlertSite service has helped the utility to gain a more comprehensive view of Web-based application performance, he said.

The utility has been favorably impressed by the responsiveness of AlertSite's support and the relatively low cost of the service. Internal users were able to access AlertSite data within one week of initiating the service, and the full range of monitoring capabilities was in place within 60 days, the executive said (this timeframe was a function of the company's internal test and rollout schedule). The cost of the AlertSite service was an order of magnitude lower than competitive offerings, he said.

While the utility is pleased with AlertSite's capabilities to deliver performance data from the end user's perspective, IT administrators would like to see additional monitoring capabilities for users and systems inside the firewall (AlertSite has just announced customer beta testing of a host resources monitoring service).

EMA's Perspective

AlertSite's offerings represent a compelling business value that includes a refreshing level of support and service. This is the very reason that many of its customers select AlertSite's products. As with many offerings on the Internet, alternatives are only a click away driving AlertSite to continuously upgrade the features and functionality. The same can be said of AlertSite's customers, whose livelihood often depends upon their Web applications being continuously available and performing within acceptable limits—competitors are often just a “click” away.

There are Web site monitoring services on the market that offer more “bells and whistles” than AlertSite. However, many of these services charge as much as ten times more for a few additional features that may or may not be required by the enterprise. EMA's perspective is that AlertSite provides upwards of 90% of the monitoring capabilities required by most enterprises, yet it costs only a fraction of its competitors' prices. This high-function, low-cost approach will make AlertSite's services highly attractive to small, medium, and large-sized enterprises alike that are tasked with cost-effectively monitoring the availability and performance of their Web sites.

There are some steps that AlertSite could take to close the functionality gap with its more expensive competitors. One such improvement would be the ability to schedule and “push” all reports (rather than just management summaries) out to IT staffers and senior executives on a regular basis, making the service more proactive and integrated with day-to-day workflow. These reports are available via the AlertSite portal on an on-demand basis today.

AlertSite recently added service level management capabilities to its suite of offerings. The initial version of the service offers helpful availability, performance, and page load data. For enterprises that are truly service-driven, future versions will need to include deeper SLM reporting capabilities. These capabilities can also be accomplished through the download of Alertsitedata, which can then be leveraged by third-party reporting tools such as Crystal Reports.

Finally, AlertSite will need to expand its monitoring capabilities on both sides of the firewall. On the inside of the firewall, AlertSite will roll out its internal host resource monitoring capability, which currently is in beta testing and should be launched later this year. On the outside of the firewall, AlertSite does not offer monitoring from as many worldwide cities as some of its competitors, although its network is more than adequate for most requirements and is expanding steadily.

On the plus side, AlertSite offers a number of advantages over its market competitors. The new security scanning service, for example, provides AlertSite users with security data that is lacking in many other Web site monitoring services. A newly announced partnership with a major Web load-testing vendor will also bring significant value to AlertSite users; functionality that is not currently available from other monitoring competitors.

Indeed, with its breadth of services and relatively low price, AlertSite could be a highly attractive offering for application service providers. In the past, ASPs have delivered essential services via the Web without a structured method for measuring and/or guaranteeing service level performance. The AlertSite service could help provide that missing link in many ASP offerings.

Based on user interviews, however, AlertSite's most significant advantages are price and support. After evaluating competitive services, some users reported that the AlertSite offerings cost up to ten times less than other monitoring services. And users were uniform in their enthusiasm for AlertSite's support services, which compares favorably against support offerings from much larger service providers.

In summary, the AlertSite services should be a part of any evaluation of Web site monitoring technology. Its capabilities are not only competitive with those offered by other Web monitoring service providers, it also offers several unique partnerships and capabilities that may give AlertSite a significant advantage over similar services. The cost of the AlertSite service is significantly lower than competitors', yet support is comparable, if not better, than support from larger competitors. With its high functionality, strong support and relatively low cost, AlertSite could be an excellent alternative for enterprises with critical Web application monitoring needs.

About AlertSite

Based in Boca Raton, Florida, AlertSite is an industry-leading provider of Internet performance measurement and management services. Designed to help customers ensure that their Web presence is always available and delivering a high “quality of experience,” AlertSite’s monitoring plans are tailored to meet the needs of all companies large and small. AlertSite monitors Web sites, eCommerce applications, mail servers, DNS servers, and other devices connected to the Internet.

About Enterprise Management Associates, Inc.

Enterprise Management Associates is an advisory and research firm providing market insight to solution providers and technology guidance to Fortune 1000 companies. The EMA team is comprised of industry respected analysts who deliver strategic awareness about computing and communications infrastructure. Coupling this team of experts with an ever-expanding knowledge repository gives EMA clients an unparalleled advantage against their competition. The firm has published hundreds of articles and books on technology management topics and is frequently requested to share their observations at management forums worldwide.

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