



## Large Linux Hoster Incorporates Windows Technologies, Quadruples Subscription Rate

### Overview

**Country or Region:** North America

**Industry:** Hosting

### Partner Profile

Netfirms supports more than 1.2 million Web sites for customers from all over the globe. Based in Toronto, Canada, the privately held company employs nearly 60 people.

### Business Situation

Netfirms had built its hosting services on Linux, and offered no services based on Microsoft technologies—yet many businesses, including existing customers, were increasingly asking for such services.

### Solution

Netfirms worked with Microsoft to develop the Netfirms MultiPlatform™ service offering, which provides access to both Microsoft Windows- and Linux-based services.

### Benefits

- Enables access to services without regard to platform
- Increases customer satisfaction and retention
- Avoids loss of business to other service providers
- Quadruples business service subscription uptake

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*Thomas Savundra, President, Netfirms*

Toronto-based Netfirms has been offering Linux-based Web-hosting services for years, but increasingly its customers—including many Web developers—were asking for additional services that the hoster could not deliver. Some customers wanted to use Microsoft® SQL Server® to power their sites; others wanted Web pages that could take advantage of Microsoft ASP.NET technologies. So Netfirms decided to roll out a Web hosting service based on Microsoft Windows Server® 2003. But rather than rolling out a parallel service offering that would force customers to maintain different accounts and separate hosting environments for their Windows and Linux-based sites, Netfirms worked closely with Microsoft to build the Netfirms MultiPlatform™ service that delivers access to both Microsoft Windows®- and Linux-based services at once. For customers, it’s the best of both worlds—and service subscription rates reflect their enthusiasm.



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## Situation

Toronto-based Netfirms has been making itself well-known in Web hosting circles for nearly a decade. Not only does the firm host more than 1.2 million Web sites, but it also acts as a domain name registrar, an e-mail and e-commerce expert, even as a services and technology solutions consultant. Yet there was one thing that the firm did not have going for it: an offering based on Microsoft Windows.

This was proving to be something of a liability.

“Up to around 2005 our customers had been using our clustered Linux platform,” says Jason Matheson, director of marketing for Netfirms. “But they were starting to ask for services based on the Microsoft platform—things like ASP.NET and Microsoft SQL Server.”

It is worth noting that these were not just any customers; these were customers from the Web developer community itself, each of which might be developing and maintaining many Web sites on the hosting service provider’s clustered Linux platform. Netfirms soon discovered that the Web developers’ desire for these Microsoft-based services stemmed from their clients’ demands for these Microsoft-based services. And, until Netfirms could provide support for these services, the company would have to tell its own Web developer clients to look elsewhere to support their customers’ needs, which proved a bitter pill to swallow.

“Given the demand, it was obvious to us that we’d have to provide a Microsoft solution,” says Matheson, “but we didn’t want to do it the way all other hosting providers do it. We did not want to have our customers maintain two separate accounts on two separate platforms.”

Accordingly, Netfirms set about creating a Web hosting service unlike any other currently available from a large hosting service provider. The result of this effort is a MultiPlatform service offering that enables developers and their customers to use services based on Microsoft Windows and Linux in the same service delivery environment.

## Solution

The Netfirms MultiPlatform Technology is made up of a grid of clustered systems. More than 250 servers, from vendors such as Dell and Rackable Systems, work together to support this offering. One cluster within the grid runs Microsoft Windows Server 2003 Web Edition with Internet Information Services, and it provides support for services that require the Microsoft .NET framework, including ASP.NET. Another cluster of servers runs the Debian GNU/Linux distribution, and it enables access to Apache, PERL-CGI, and other Linux-based services. A third cluster runs Microsoft Windows Server 2003 Standard Edition and supports applications such as Microsoft SQL Server 2005. Yet another cluster runs the Berkeley standard distribution of UNIX and provides support databases running on MySQL as well as a variety of e-mail and spam filtering services. Multiple storage server clusters, configured for RAID 5 redundancy, provide file server support for all the Web and application servers, as well as all 1.2 million plus Web sites.

Even before adding the Microsoft Windows components, Netfirms had a fully clustered solution with a single interface and IT managers at Netfirms were keen to build on that. They wanted to take advantage of all the work that had already been done to create a provisioning system and to manage billing, support, trouble tickets, and more.

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“We worked with Microsoft for about a year to get this right,” says Matheson. “Microsoft provided technical support through its evangelists and its engineering groups to figure out the best way to incorporate the Windows technologies into our clustered service delivery environment. It made sense to engage with Microsoft to develop this solution. That ensured that the technology could be certified and positions us to apply for Microsoft Gold Partner status.”

## Benefits

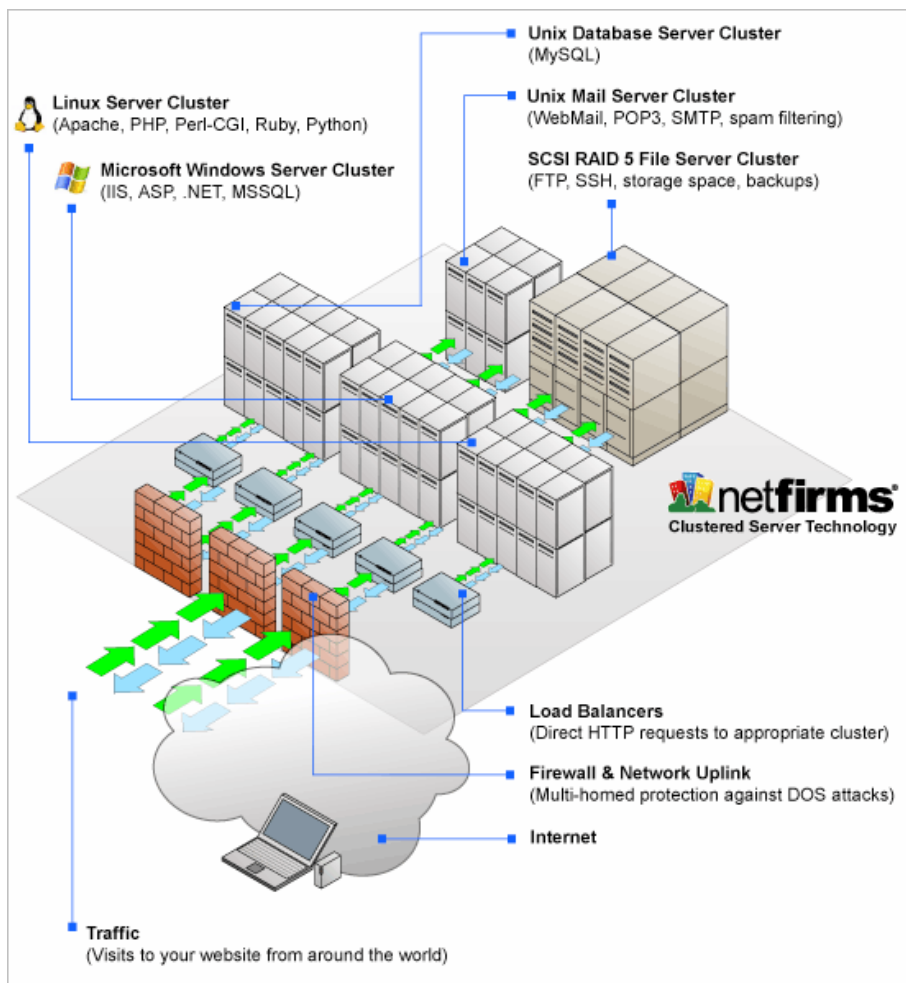
For Netfirms and its customers, the introduction of this MultiPlatform service has been a great success. Netfirms no longer has to tell Web developers to look elsewhere to meet the needs of their clients for Windows-based services, so the hoster is no longer losing business that the Web developers would gladly have brought in. Moreover, many of the Web developers that had been compelled to seek support elsewhere have brought their Windows-based clients back over to Netfirms since the introduction of its MultiPlatform service. Indeed, over the course of 2007, the number of subscribers taking advantage of the Netfirms MultiPlatform service more than quadrupled.

## A Single Solution for All Services

“We’ve developed an offering that unifies Windows and Linux,” says Matheson, “so if you’re a Web developer you can run applications from either the Windows or Linux worlds on the same Web site. If you’ve coded ASP.NET scripts or PHP scripts, they can coexist under the same roof.”

“For Web developers, this eliminates one of the biggest decisions they face,” Matheson goes on to say. “Which platform to use is always the first decision a developer has to have a customer make. But with the Netfirms MultiPlatform offering, that’s no longer an issue. There’s no possibility of committing to the ‘wrong’ technology. Developers and businesses can pick whatever technologies they need to accomplish their goals.”

“We were looking at a customer’s Web site the other day,” recalls Thomas Savundra, President of Netfirms. “Originally it was just a flat site developed to run on Linux. Later on they added some dynamic functionality, some forms submission applications and some blogging capabilities, but they were still using Linux to support this. Recently the company has begun to sell products online, and



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they’ve incorporated inventory system and cataloging software that runs on Windows and uses ASP.NET commerce components. The MultiPlatform environment made it easy for the company to develop a more complex Web site quickly and at a low cost.”

#### **A Source of Competitive Advantage**

“This is definitely a source of competitive advantage for Netfirms,” says Matheson. “Our customers have been asking for this—and it’s not just those who already have customers who want to run Windows-based services. There are many PHP developers who see this offering as an opportunity to expand their customer bases. They’re going after business they could not have served before.”

With business-class hosting plans starting at just \$14.95 per month—for which a business gets the Netfirms MultiPlatform offering, three hundred gigabytes of disk space, five free domain names, and three terabytes of data transfer bandwidth—it’s easy to see why developers are excited, too.

“There’s a definite increase in business as a consequence of this MultiPlatform technology,” says Savundra. “Subscriptions to our business plans have quadrupled since the introduction of our Microsoft Windows and Linux MultiPlatform offering. That’s a pretty positive sign that this offering is a hit. We’re even attracting developers who are used to using the Microsoft platform but who have customers who are intrigued by the possibilities and opportunities afforded by the open source world. We’ve got an offering here that really does meet a lot of needs.”

“We are looking forward to adding Windows Server 2008 and Internet Information Services 7 to our MultiPlatform clustered hosting infrastructure,” adds Netfirms System Administrator Steve Clarke, “The smaller footprint, higher availability, and improved

performance will benefit our customers right away in terms of speed, reliability and price.”

#### **A Cost-effective, Scalable Solution**

Has Netfirms found it significantly more costly to add support for the Windows environment? “No,” says Savundra. “We originally thought that supporting Windows might increase our costs, but our results after a year indicate that that really hasn’t happened. There have been no significant increases. While it is true that the call center is now fielding a greater number of incoming calls, the volume of calls has increased in step with the increase in subscription rates themselves. “There are fewer calls into the call center than we anticipated,” says Savundra, “and one reason for that is the amount of information that’s available from other sources around developing for the Microsoft environment.”

Still, with the subscription rate for the MultiPlatform offering climbing so swiftly, other service providers might worry about degradation of services. Not Netfirms. Its use of grid-computing and clustering technologies means that everything is essentially load balanced. The notions of “shared” and “dedicated” servers do not apply in this environment. “We distribute traffic over hundreds of servers,” says Matheson, which means that the clusters are always there to absorb changes in the traffic patterns. “We’ve built big to be as scalable as possible. If one of our customers is featured on CNN or Slashdot and experiences a sudden spike in traffic, it’s not a problem for us. The cluster absorbs the traffic and nobody misses a beat.”

This clustered approach also makes it easy for Netfirms to build and expand its offerings over time. The popularity of this MultiPlatform technology has Savundra and Matheson looking to the future, and down the road they see bringing in additional clusters that can provide customers with support for other Microsoft technologies. There may be clus-

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ters supporting Microsoft Exchange Server for messaging needs and clusters providing support for collaboration services based on Windows SharePoint® Services. "We can just add an 'Exchange cloud' to our cluster," says Savundra, "and the service becomes available to all the users regardless of the platform they're using."

"This really is an industry first," says Matheson. "The Netfirms MultiPlatform offering enables Web developers to make fewer decisions and work with more choices. It lowers the cost to develop and manage Web hosting. All Web developers should really be trying this."

## Microsoft Communications Sector

Microsoft Communications Sector delivers integrated, adaptable, comprehensive solutions built on innovative software. These solutions help communications service providers develop, deploy, and evolve customized and differentiated offerings that enhance the user experience.

For more information about Microsoft solutions for the Communications Sector, go to: [www.microsoft.com/serviceproviders](http://www.microsoft.com/serviceproviders)

### Software and Services

- Microsoft server product portfolio
  - Microsoft SQL Server 2005
  - Windows Server 2003 Standard Edition
  - Windows Server 2003 Web Edition

### Hardware

- Dell ProLiant Servers
- Rackable Systems Servers