

Keeping Your Online Store Up & Running - System Outage Planning

Keeping your website running isn't the only technology concern for today's small e-commerce businesses. Your customers rely on your ability to communicate with them via email, telephone, or fax. A failure in any one of a number of your infrastructure technology systems can disrupt your operations, keeping you from shipping orders, answering calls, taking orders, and processing credit cards.

The true cost of downtime can be significant, and includes many things other than just lost revenue from lost orders. Increased (and expensive) customer service time, refunded and cancelled orders, loss of customer loyalty, and opportunity loss associated with handling the outage itself can be tremendously expensive.

There are a variety of different infrastructure components that an e-commerce business relies on to operate including electrical power, Internet access, website hosting, email, and core software applications. If any one of these systems fails, the ability to serve your customers can be disrupted.

Accessing the Internet from your business can often be the most critical potential failure points. Today's e-commerce business use the Internet to send or receive emails, receive orders from your storefront, and produce shipping labels. Typically, small e-commerce businesses rely on DSL or cable Internet services. There are inexpensive, high-performance wireless based back-up systems available for your business to use in the event of an outage of your primary Internet provider.

When you have multiple ISP access points, you'll need to set-up your network to use both your primary and secondary services. Inexpensive, but powerful, routers can be configured to monitor the ISP access of your providers, and automatically route your Internet access via whatever service is up. This keeps your operations running without disruption, even if your DSL or cable is down.

The newest Internet based toll free services offer a very creative solution to your inbound call handling needs. In addition to being very inexpensive, these systems can be set-up to route your inbound toll free calls to multiple different phone numbers. This way, if your landline is down, your customers can still reach you because your toll free service can route your calls to your VOIP or cellular phone number without disruption.

It seems these days that the electrical utilities are becoming less reliable in many areas of the country. Installing UPS (Uninterruptible Power Supplies) can give you short-term back-up power, but it can be very expensive to equip each critical device in your business with hours of UPS back up. Remember, its not just your PC that needs a UPS, but also routers, modems, switches, phones, and servers also need to run.

An inexpensive solution for longer-term power outages is to have a back-up generator available onsite. You can pick-up an inexpensive generator at your local home center, and you can have an electrician install a basic generator connection switch to your circuit panel. In the event of a power outage, you can start-up your generator, plug it into the generator transfer switch, and flip a couple switches, and all your systems can be operating. Make sure you test this system occasionally to make sure your generator starts easily, and that you have configured you switch on the proper circuits.

Most online stores are hosted at reliable web hosts. One of the most critical integration items it to make sure your payment processing system is equally reliable. It doesn't do any good to have a reliable website that can't process a credit card when a customer makes a purchase.

To protect yourself from a disaster like a fire, flood, or theft, make sure you are backing up on-line store's data files at least weekly, and store the back-up off site. Make sure you get copies of data that might be on various PCs at your business.

It is important that you test all your redundant, and back up systems periodically to make sure they are working. There is nothing worse than having a critical system outage and then find out your back-up systems aren't working. Then you are attempting to fix TWO systems, not one. Keep the back-up and redundant systems operational when things are running well to make sure you can continue your business operations when a major outage occurs.

A carefully thought out set of investments in your infrastructure can make your life much less stressful, and can reap a good return on investment. An online store doing \$500,000 in revenue per year risks over \$100 per hour when business is incapacitated by a system outage. Only 1% of downtime per year can cost up to \$3,000. When you consider that you may have ten critical systems, if each is 99.9% reliable, combined they are going to cost you 1%.

About the Author

Edward Cole's online [baby shower party store](#) has shipped thousands of orders. Edward is part of the management team at PartyPail.com, and he says that the [Radio Flyer baby shower](#) is one of his favorite shower themes.

