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How to Better Protect Your Business Data

Overview

When dealers think about "business assets," they typically think in terms of the inventory on hand, facilities and infrastructure. What about data? Isn't that the most valuable business asset of all?

Data records all business transactions. It stores customer orders, establishes fulfillment terms, and records and quantifies the big-picture in terms of business successes or failures. And it's through the analysis of data that all new business strategies are conceived and carried out.

The reality is that dealerships typically don't protect their data as comprehensively as they could (and should). Backups occur infrequently; the maximum data that might be lost at any point is too great. Furthermore, the backup system and media—usually just tapes, a tape drive, and an application running on a server—are inherently too fragile and susceptible to failure.

Critical business data is therefore continually at risk; and in consequence, business resilience in a larger sense is also at risk. Losing just a single day's transactions, for instance, would be very disruptive to most dealerships (not to mention their customers). Fortunately, cloud computing brings with it an entirely new and significantly enhanced approach to backing up, archiving, and restoring data on demand with strengths that traditional backup methods simply can't match.

Disaster can strike at any time

Business data faces more threats today than ever before. Consider:

- An unpredictable physical disaster like a fire, hurricane or flood could damage or destroy key IT infrastructure, including servers responsible for storing, backing up or restoring data, not to mention the data itself on primary servers.

- Security threats—like malware or hackers—are more sophisticated, numerous and devastating than they used to be. In fact, according to the U.S. Small and Medium-Sized Business 2014-2018 forecast by IDC, 71% of security breaches target small businesses.

- Individual media, like storage tapes or optical disks, are inherently fragile and can fail for reasons ranging from exposure to magnetism to physical loss or damage.

- The infrastructure responsible for performing backup operations—usually just a server and tape drive—can fail for all the usual reasons computers typically crash: hardware or software failures.

- Backup tapes are not safely stored on a routine basis at an offsite repository.

- Backups are not continuous, meaning that all the data created since the last backup is at risk. A manual restoration of such a server will certainly take many hours. Automatic restoration from a recent tape backup will also take hours longer now than ever, because operating systems and applications are far larger than they were just a decade ago.

While tape backups were, for many years, the only practical data protection option, this is simply no longer the case.

Sooner or later, threats will arise, data will be lost, and the business will take a toll; according to the National Cyber Security Alliance, "among small and medium business owners that suffer a breach, a staggering 60% go out of business after six months." It's not a question of if, but when and you need to be prepared.

Elements of protection

Creating and implementing an improved strategy doesn't have to be complicated. As a rule of thumb, if your disaster recovery plan involves more pages than you have employees, it can and should be simplified.

Put simply, almost any optimized data protection/recovery plan should:

- Address the potential failure of both the primary servers that store data and the various elements of the backup system

- Acknowledge the possibility that a primary place of business might be damaged, destroyed or inaccessible due to a natural disaster

- Provide a means of accessing/restoring crucial data from alternate locations

- Provide a faster-than-tape means of both backing up data (ideally without interrupting business operations) and restoring it on demand

- Reduce the time interval between backups so as to minimize the data that might be lost

- Leverage automation as much as possible, to eliminate errors created by manual processes

Make the plan itself easily available to employees, anywhere they are, over the Internet—and link team members following a disaster

Protection From the Elements

Cloud computing offers a relatively easy, fast and inexpensive way to achieve all of these goals. Cloud offers a safe, reliable and entirely automatic way to copy data from anywhere in the dealership's infrastructure to an offsite provider. The benefits are clear and impressive.

- Tapes, tape drives and backup software are no longer inherently necessary. All the unreliability of the media and tape drive is eliminated at a stroke; so, too, are the related business processes, such as rotating tapes to offsite locations.

- Because tape is replaced as the medium, backups happen faster, copies are stored in a much more reliable way, and data can be restored quickly as well—at any time.

- The fact that the data is stored in the cloud, offsite, also means that it can be accessed anywhere at any time, using web browsers, even on smartphones, and even if a physical disaster has made the primary workplace unavailable.

- Cloud backup configuration can take place as often as the dealership deems necessary. This significantly reduces the potential data that might be lost between backups.

- The dealership is free from having to manage, maintain or even think about the technology used to achieve backups—the cloud provider assumes all of that responsibility. So instead of the data protection strategy becoming more complicated, it can become simpler.

Planning for Disaster

Dealerships will also benefit by considering and implementing the available best practices that pair well with cloud. These include:

- Create and update contact lists for all staff as well as key business partners, clients and customers, and maintain this online. The goal should be to get everyone in touch quickly and to restore business operations as fully as possible. Also helpful: taking advantage of social media and mobile devices for this purpose.

- Consider augmenting a primary cloud backup with local additional backups. This increases costs and management complexity, but adds another layer of protection.

- Make sure the disaster recovery plan is, itself, stored online (along with contacts and backups!), that it can easily be accessed from mobile devices like smartphones, and that all team members know where to find it. Obviously, maintaining and updating local copies is also important.

- Consider working with a cloud provider to supply temporary, cloud-based virtual servers into which key data can be restored. If a primary workplace and its infrastructure are unavailable or offline for an extended period, it could mean business failure. Restoring key data is fast and easy in the cloud and once normal operations resume, these virtual servers can simply hand off functionality to the main infrastructure.

- Leverage employees' personal devices where appropriate to enhance the total backup infrastructure. This also, of course, means that employees must be thoroughly pre-informed concerning their roles and contributions to the disaster recovery plan, including the intended device functionality at that time.

- Test and review potential areas of data and business vulnerability at least once every year. Disaster recovery plans and processes often have unexpected shortfalls, so it's best to discover and address these well before a disaster actually occurs. For instance, it might be that the dealership should be backing up more data than just the most obvious databases and disk images, or that certain processes turn out to take too long to execute to achieve business goals.

- Notify key partners, vendors, etc., well in advance concerning appropriate details of the plan. In some cases, it might be possible that some of them can help—for instance, banks might be prepared to provide an emergency line of credit, or temporary workspaces might be supplied, including broadband Internet access, workstations or other crucial resources. This, of course, also applies in reverse (the dealership might be able to help the partners and vendors).

Cloud computing offers a superior alternative to traditional backup methods. Because the cloud environment leverages automation to copy data to offsite locations, and store that data to disk, far more data can be backed up and restored more quickly—all while simplifying, not complicating, the process.

By educating team members, and linking them with each other, as well as key business partners and customers, dealerships can mitigate the worst consequences and get back to business as usual as quickly as possible.

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