Looking a Gift Horse In the Mouth: Web Server Alternatives

Microsoft Internet Information Server (MIIS) costs nothing, assuming you're buying Windows NT Server. Competitive products run about $500, but that doesn't make choosing MIIS a no-brainer. Experienced Web site developers will tell you that the price of the server software itself doesn't even show up on radar when you're planning a Web project.

Other factors do count, though. For the details, we consulted one of the experts: Jeb Palmer, a software engineer and Web development veteran at MetaBridge, a Seattle-based consulting firm. MetaBridge has employed both MIIS and other servers in its projects.

When Palmer picks a Web server for a particular app, he considers the server's stability and performance, and there MIIS shines. But he says it is equally important to evaluate accompanying tools, support, documentation, APIs, access control, database connectors, and security.

"People who want an easy jump into Web publishing might consider O'Reilly WebSite," Palmer says. "The site-management tools and documentation give neophytes what they need, but sophisticated Webmasters might also appreciate the tools it offers." And it provides a VB front end for app design (see Table A for URLs of NT-based Web server makers).

Those doing low-end installations should note that most of MIIS' competitors run on Windows 95 and NT workstations and earlier revs of the NT server, none of which MIIS supports.

Yet Process Software, whose Purveyor Web server provides one of MIIS' closest competitors, reports that 80 percent of its installed base uses NT Workstation to run intranet applications. These support lower traffic levels than commercial Internet sites such as Microsoft's Web site, which MIIS was originally designed to handle.

Palmer recommends MIIS for many high-volume applications. "It performs well pushing data down the wire," he says. But he also sees Microsoft using MIIS as a tool to help establish Win32's dominance, relying on ISVs to flesh out MIIS' feature set.

If you need important features like transaction tracing, and no ISV has what you need, you might need to turn to another Web server. Also, vendors like Netscape, which supports both Unix and NT, help you bridge heterogeneous environments in a way Microsoft won't.

True, MIIS comes with ODBC connectivity: the Internet Database Connector. Competitors such as Process Purveyor come with comparable ODBC connectivity tools, but such tools don't allow you to generate multiple queries during a single Common Gateway Interface (CGI) transaction and allow only HTML output from database results, so you can't direct a user to another page based on query results. Palmer uses such tools for simple forms processing, but not for creating dynamic pages.

For industrial-strength database access, Palmer chooses from a group of third-party tools, regardless of Web server (see Table B for URLs of database access tool makers). Most use ODBC, but they differ in how they set up database transactions and create HTML output. Some of these products will come out in ISAPI versions for a performance boost. Check out Nomad WebDBC 2.5, due by early summer. Like IDC, WebDBC 2.5 lets you bypass CGI's limitations and use ISAPI without having to add C code to your workload.

And some non-ODBC database connectors may go that route as well. Face it—you'll want native-mode connections, not ODBC, for maximum performance.

"These third-party products are more capable than IDC," Palmer says. "They handle multiple database transactions during the submittal of a single HTML form, validate user input more flexibly, and do more sophisticated processing of query results."

MIIS does have an edge regarding integration with Microsoft BackOffice products. ISAPI provides the glue for integrating Web servers with BackOffice, and Web server vendors are adopting ISAPI rapidly.

No wonder: ISAPI runs processes up to ten times faster than CGI. Process Purveyor will support OLE Automation by summer, enabling it to talk to OLE-enabled VB apps and Microsoft Exchange.

BackOffice/MIIS integration also lets you use already defined users and groups for your NT network. However, Purveyor's external authentication DLL lets you plug into your NT user group database, although you must write the NT security system code. You can extend Purveyor authentication to use NT security, just as MIIS does.

As time passes even the most Microsoft-centric shop will have more MIIS alternatives. Some possibilities:

• CompuServe Spry SafetyWeb Server, performance champ of *PC Week's* January 29 NT Web server lab test.
• EMWAC, the European freeware that Process Purveyor is based on.
• Process Purveyor, which MetaBridge has used in high-volume sites.
• Netscape Commerce Server, a Unix port. Others on this list were built for NT from the ground up. But don't discount a more NT-exploitive version.
•O'Reilly WebSite Professional, due out Spring 1996.

MIIS stands tall, but it doesn't stand alone. And that's good for everyone.
—VBPJ Staff

Company	Product	URL
Aspect	Alibaba	http://www.aspectse.com
CompuServe	Spry Web Server	http://www.server.spry.com
CompuServe	Spry SafetyWeb Server	http://www.server.spry.com
Folio	Infobase Web Server	http://www.folio.com
Internet Factory	Commerce Builder	http://www.artisoft.com
Microsoft	Internet Information Server	http://www.microsoft.com
EMWAC Computing Services	EMWAC (freeware)	http://emwac.ed.ac.uk/
Netscape	Commerce Server	http://www.home.netscape.com
Netscape	Communications Server	http://www.home.netscape.com
O'Reilly	WebSite	http://www.ora.com
O'Reilly	WebSite Professional	http://www.ora.com
Process	Purveyor	http://www.process.com

TABLE A   *NT-Based Web Servers.*

Company	Product	URL
Allaire	Cold Fusion	http://www.allaire.com
Aspect	dbWeb	http://www.aspectse.com
Nomad	WebDBC	http://www. com
Spider Technologies	Spider (NT version in beta)	http://www.w3spider.com

TABLE B   *Database Access Tools.*

   http://www.windx.com