

# 18 Things to Consider When Selecting an Exchange Provider

MailStreet Hosted Exchange

## 18 Critical Questions to Ask A Microsoft Exchange Service Provider

Web hosting companies, local Value Added Resellers (VARs), regional Systems Integrators, telecom providers, freelance Microsoft Certified Software Engineers, data center companies – the list of vendors offering “hosted Microsoft Exchange” is practically endless, and seems to grow longer every day. A search for “hosted Microsoft Exchange” on Google.com comes up with more than 300,000 results! Given this explosion of so-called “service providers,” how is an organization supposed to make an intelligent decision on whom to trust with this mission critical system?

### WHY CHOOSE MAILSTREET?

- 99.9% committed uptime SLA, the first and highest in the industry!
- Largest provider of Hosted Exchange services
- Publicly traded with a strong financial background
- **U.S. Based** Live Customer Support via Phone and e-mail, powered by MailStreet employees
- Best-of-breed, clustered environment with full redundancy with **CCR** (Cluster Continuous Replication) providing no single point of failure
- Tier IV, SAS 70 Certified Data Center
- MS Gold Certified Partner for Hosting and Applications Services
- Active participant in the Microsoft Joint Development Program for Microsoft Exchange.

MailStreet offers this guide to help you narrow the field. Our hope, of course, is that MailStreet will come out on top of your list – but even if we don’t, we think these are issues that you must consider when choosing a partner for outsourcing your messaging and collaboration system.

We’ve broken the list into subsections to help you identify the issues that are most important to you, and we’ve provided a chart at the end of this paper to record the answers from up to five vendors. This should give you a quick reference for comparing and contrasting the service providers on your short list.

## About MailStreet

MailStreet is an industry leader in business-class communications that provides Exchange Email hosting, business VoIP, and hosted SharePoint services to over 20,000 small and mid-sized companies.

## COMPANY INFORMATION

### 1. What is your primary business?

It’s a simple enough question – what is it that your company does? But many “service providers” will hem and haw about this question, because what they really do is something else entirely: design services, contract systems integration work, etc.

There may be advantages for your organization to using a secondary offering from a diverse company, but you must weigh the vendor’s commitment to and experience with the software-as-a-service business model.

### 2. How long have you been providing Exchange in a hosted environment?

Many companies will fudge this answer – “We’ve been in business for 10 years!” “We’ve been hosting servers for 5 years!” But ask them specifically how long they’ve been offering Microsoft Exchange in a hosted environment, and stick with it until you get an answer.

Experience counts; like all sophisticated software systems, Exchange has issues that will emerge over time, and many of these issues are unique to the hosted environment – which is an order of magnitude more complex than simple one-company on-premises installations. And only time spent with the system and delivery model, sorting through these issues and documenting their causes and fixes, can guarantee that the same problems won’t keep cropping up.

### **3. What's your relationship with Microsoft? Do you have a signed Service Provider Licensing Agreement?**

Only a small group of Microsoft partners are actually certified and licensed to run Hosted Exchange – they must have a signed Service Provider Licensing Agreement (SPLA) to legally provide these services. And to get a SPLA, the company must undergo training of their engineers, evaluation of their systems, and periodic audits of their server and client licenses.

If a provider answers that they're a "Microsoft Certified Partner" or MCP, that's not enough – they don't have the training, experience, or authorization to offer hosted Exchange services. Microsoft has been generously ignoring this issue for several months, but they will start enforcing this in the future – potentially leaving YOU on the hook for license payments, or without a service altogether.

Even if a company says they're a "Gold Certified" Microsoft partner, ask them about their certification. Microsoft offers certification in many different applications, and the company may be "Gold Certified" for Windows or IIS instead of hosted Exchange. For more details on certification, see question 4, below.

MailStreet was the very first company in the world to sign a Service Provider Licensing Agreement with Microsoft, and helped Microsoft write the terms of this agreement in 1998. Our services and licenses have been audited by Microsoft, and are fully certified and approved for sale to organizations like yours.

### **4. What kind of certifications does your company have?**

There are several types of "certifications" that hosted Exchange service providers might have. Some are important, some are not so important – but it's important that you know the difference:

#### **Vendor Certifications:**

**Microsoft Certified Partner:** this is the base level of Microsoft partnerships. Every single Exchange hosting provider should have this certification, at a minimum. This ensures that they are licensed to sell Microsoft technology – however, as noted above, this does NOT ensure that they are licensed to sell hosted Microsoft Exchange.

**Microsoft Exchange Service Provider License Agreement (SPLA):** as described above, any Exchange hosting company should have a valid Service Provider Licensing Agreement, or SPLA, with Microsoft. If they don't, they don't have the training, experience, or authorization to offer hosted Exchange services.

**Microsoft Gold Certification:** Microsoft offers a Gold level of certification in many different areas, including Exchange, .Net, Windows, and more. To get this level of certification, the vendor must go through a technical audit of their systems and pay Microsoft a hefty fee. While this may ensure that the company's architecture met Microsoft's standards at one point in time, the lack of regular audits makes this less valuable over the long haul.

**Cisco Certification:** Cisco offers certification for networks designed around their products. This certification ensures that the initial design and the network management policies meet Cisco's recommendations.

**HP/Dell/IBM/Suntone Certifications:** Most server vendors offer certification to their customers. The certification processes vary widely from vendor to vendor, but few have substantial ongoing requirements (except that the service provider keep purchasing servers from the vendor.)

#### **International Quality Certifications**

**ISO 9000:** The ISO 9000 family of standards is concerned with "quality management". This is defined as everything the organization does to enhance customer satisfaction by meeting customer and applicable regulatory requirements and continually to improve its performance in this regard. In other words, ISO 9000 standards encompass all processes and operations in a business, with standards for process documentation, results measurement, analysis, and continuous improvement. Some of the most highly regarded businesses in the world utilize the ISO 9000 framework to ensure delivery of high quality goods and services to their customers.

## INFRASTRUCTURE / SYSTEMS

### 5. *What's your basic server configuration? Single servers with redundancy, active/passive clusters, or active/active clusters?*

#### BENEFITS OF USING HOSTED EXCHANGE

- Reduced TCO (Total Cost of Ownership) as opposed to using an In House Exchange server.
- Eliminates the hassles of Outlook software and CAL license management for Exchange.
- Provides the advantage of Hosting Exchange in an advanced data center with redundant systems that provide daily backup service. Servers are also customized for optimal Exchange performance.
- Receive U.S.-based customer and technical support from experienced Exchange technicians.
- Keep down costs associated with Internal IT staff, or free up time to allocate IT resources to other mission critical projects.
- All patches and Exchange software updates are managed and efficiently implemented by Hosting Company.
- Wireless access without the investment in wireless infrastructure. Using Hosted Exchange, SMBs may take advantage of the latest in wireless technology (BlackBerry, iPhone, Good Messaging, etc.) without the investment in wireless servers and licensing.

If a vendor offers to host a server for you, ask them about the setup. Unless you're a company with several thousand users, they're probably offering you a single server with some redundancy, but no clustering to provide a backup system in case of failure of the primary server. MailStreet's research shows that it's impossible to deliver more than 97.5% reliability (i.e., 18 hours of downtime per month!) with a single server setup – and when outages occur, they tend to last significantly longer.

Clusters of servers are a group of servers that are acting as one system; if one server in the cluster fails, the other servers can take up the load. In active/passive clusters, two or more servers are configured in the cluster but only one is active, and the backup must be activated when needed. In active/active mode, the backup server is actively functioning as a part of the system and automatically picks up the slack with no manual intervention and no waiting.

Both active/passive and active/active clustering can be used to deliver high reliability. Active/active clustering, however, is much more expensive, as separate licenses for Windows, Exchange, SQL server, and Active Directory are required.

MailStreet utilizes active/passive clustering in our Exchange 2007 servers, enabling us to deliver 100% system availability at a highly competitive cost.

### 6. *What kind of storage system do you use?*

This is a complex question. There are three types of storage for any Exchange server:

- the local disks that store the OS;
- the transaction log volume; and
- the database volume.

In many cases, Exchange hosting providers use local disks in the server for all of these storage requirements. This is a risky proposition, and is NOT the recommended configuration for highly available storage.

To deliver high performance, highly available services, a service provider should utilize local disks configured in a mirrored fashion for the OS, and then configure the other two volumes on some type of external storage, ideally on a Storage Area Network (SAN).

MailStreet uses RAID1 disk arrays for the local OS disks,

**As Exchange Server steadily gained in popularity over the years, Microsoft continually added more functionality to deliver more value. But increased complexity requires administrators to spend more time maintaining the server, therefore outsourcing Exchange service becomes an attractive alternative for SMBs.**

and a highly available EMC SAN for the transaction log volume and the database volume. This setup enables us to deliver maximum reliability at a reasonable cost, and enables us to perform high-performance system backups on a nightly basis.

### 7. *What protocol do I use to access the servers?*

Microsoft's Messaging Application Programming Interface (MAPI) is the protocol typically used for communications between Microsoft Outlook client software and Microsoft Exchange server software.

This is the only protocol that enables all of the collaborative features of Exchange: shared calendars, public folders, shared tasks, workflow applications, etc.

Additionally, the two components of this client/server system support other protocols for different situations:

POP for email collection over low-bandwidth links; IMAP for public folder access in the same situation; LDAP for directory services with POP/IMAP clients; and, of course, Outlook Web Access (OWA), which isn't a protocol but is an alternative method of accessing your accounts.

In the best of all possible worlds, your service provider should support MAPI for standard operations, and POP/IMAP for use under specific circumstances. OWA should

and executives, and to save money by deploying Light mailboxes for occasional users.

Finally, some ISPs are blocking a port on their networks (port 135) that is required for standard communications between Microsoft Outlook and Microsoft Exchange Server. The simplest way around this is to use a feature called "RPC over HTTPS" – make sure you ask if the service provider offers this feature.

### **8. Do you own/lease and manage your own hardware, or do you contract for the monitoring and maintenance of servers and storage?**

Surprisingly, some service providers don't really manage the servers and storage systems running their Exchange systems. Instead, they've contracted with another hosting company to host and manage these systems, and the hosted Exchange provider simply monitors the software and the user accounts.

At MailStreet we strongly believe that the growing level of integration between the OS and applications (including Windows Server, Exchange Server, SQL Server, Active Directory, Microsoft Operations Manager, and much more) require companies to manage the entire stack as an integrated operation.

Providing an artificial break between the OS and the application is not conducive to high availability and consistent quality of service. However, ownership of the physical servers is important; leasing or "utility computing" services offered by major hardware vendors can offer a significant cost savings, which can be passed along to our clients.

### **9. Can I get a tour of your data center?**

This is actually a trick question. Many hosted Exchange providers will gladly offer you a tour of their data centers – but they shouldn't. Allowing visitors into the areas where they run mission-critical servers simply exposes their lax security policies. Physical security of servers and related systems is perhaps the most overlooked part of system security, yet offers one of the simplest ways to play havoc with a system.

MailStreet utilizes advanced data center facilities managed by Data Foundry. These facilities require photo ID cards, signature matching, and hand-scan matching in order to gain access. We NEVER allow users or sales prospects to tour the facilities – in fact, only a handful of key MailStreet personnel are authorized to enter the facility.



Hosted Exchange provides Users with access to all of their email folders across the enterprise: via Outlook at home/office/laptop, via Outlook Web Access (OWA) when away from your PC, and via mobile options such as BlackBerry, Active Sync, iPhone, and Good Mobile Messaging.

also be part of every mailbox. However, MAPI tends to be very processor intensive, and some service providers charge extra for it, or don't support it at all – essentially eliminating most of the shared collaboration features of Microsoft Exchange and transforming it into an expensive basic mail solution.

MailStreet supports MAPI as the default communications protocol for all of our Exchange Full mailboxes; these mailboxes also support POP/IMAP and OWA. MailStreet also offer a "Light" version of a mailbox for very large organizations with a high number of clerical workers, shop floor workers, etc., who only need basic email functions without the shared features. These mix-and-match feature-set enables large companies (1,000 users or more) to deploy full-featured Exchange for knowledge workers

### **10. Have you eliminated all single points of failure in your architecture?**

IT managers know, it's the little things that cause failures. Burntout Network Interface Cards, failed fans, broken cables – a \$5 part can bring down a multi-million dollar system if each piece isn't configured in a redundant fashion.

At MailStreet, all of our servers are fully redundant, from NICs to power supplies to cables; the data center has redundant power, cooling, and separate physical entrances for redundant connectivity to the Internet backbone; and major systems, such as Exchange Servers, Simple Mail Transfer Protocol (SMTP) Gateways, storage, are configured with backups that can failover in an emergency. We even maintain the capacity to restore functions to all users in case of a data center failure, by reserving capacity at our Network Operations Center, which is offsite from the data center.

## **SERVICE LEVEL AGREEMENT (SLA)**

### **11. What is the guarantee you provide regarding system availability?**

There are several components to a Service Level Agreement (SLA), the guarantee that service providers offer to you regarding the services they'll provide. The most basic is the uptime guarantee, or system availability guarantee. Most service providers offer in excess of 99% availability, but there are huge variances in this range. Consider this comparison:

- 99% availability: up to 7.5 hours per month downtime
- 99.5% availability: up to 3.6 hour per month downtime
- 99.9% availability: less than 45 minutes per month downtime

Generally, these guarantees exclude certain conditions, and make provisions for certain maintenance periods on a weekly basis. Be careful of any SLA that makes provisions for more than 1 hour of scheduled maintenance per week, and make sure that this maintenance window is scheduled at a time convenient to your users.

Additionally, many service providers offer these as "targets," but include no penalties or rebates if they fall below the guaranteed level – essentially rendering the SLA useless.

MailStreet guarantees 100% systems availability, with financial rebates for any months where we're out of compliance with the SLA. For details, ask your MailStreet account manager for a copy of our Exchange SLA.

### **12. How many months over the last year have you failed to meet the terms of your SLA?**

Guarantees and promises are all well and good, but would you want a cheap system that breaks down all the time? History of performance against the SLA is an important question to ask any service provider – how many months over the last year have they been out of compliance with their SLA? What was the size of the rebates they provided?

There's an old boxing axiom: everybody has a game plan until they get hit for the first time. In other words, seeing how a service provider operates when something goes wrong is every bit as important as how they operate when things go right.

MailStreet has documented policies and procedures for dealing with outages, reduced functioning, security threats, and other issues that may cause downtime. We practice drills for emergency response, including emergency server rebuilds and restoration from tape, on a regular basis to ensure that any problems that do arise are dealt with quickly and efficiently – and that they're fully documented, including root cause analysis, to help guarantee they won't happen again.

## OPERATIONS

### **13. What kind of backups do you do, and how often?**

There are two basic types of backups: incremental backups, and full backups. A full backup is exactly what it sounds like – all information is backed up onto disk or tape. Incremental backups start with a full backup, then each day or week, a backup is made only of the information that has changed since the last backup.

Full backups take longer to perform, which is the reason that many service providers only do full backups on a weekly or monthly basis, and use incremental backups in between. The difference between the two types is primarily in the speed to restoration; with a full backup, only a single set of files is required for restoration. With incremental backups, the original full backup must be restored, then each of the incremental backups are restored, one by one. In an emergency, when services must be restored as quickly as possible, restoration from incremental backups may take hours longer than restoration from a full backup.

MailStreet does full backups of all data in our systems every night. It may take a bit longer to perform these backups, but in the rare cases where restoration is the only option, we'll be able to get you back up and running very quickly.

### **14. How often do you do practice restorations?**

A library of backup tapes may look impressive, but having documented procedures for how to restore from these tapes is every bit as important as having the data. And performing practice restorations periodically enables companies to work out the bugs from these procedures, ensuring a smooth process when restorations are required. Remember, performing a restoration for the first time during an emergency is not considered a "best practice."

MailStreet performs test backups from real data on a weekly basis, ensuring both the integrity of the data and the smooth performance of our documented procedures. In an emergency, this experience is invaluable.

### **15. How fast do you install security patches and upgrades?**

Microsoft moved to a more regular schedule of releasing bug fixes and security patches. Some companies don't install them at all, leaving themselves open to viruses and other security threats. Some companies install every patch – but most patches are not regression tested by Microsoft, so they may cause as many problems as they

fix.

The right way to do this takes time and resources: service providers should build a lab environment and test these patches for stability in an environment that closely matches their production servers. Without this internal testing, there's no way to know if the patch causes new problems. Additionally, all deployments of server patches must be documented and tracked to ensure consistent standards for all servers, and to provide a paper trail for trouble-shooting when problems arise.

MailStreet maintains a test lab in our Network Operations Center, enabling us to fully test every patch and incremental upgrade before deployment on our production servers. Additionally, our ISO procedures require documentation of all aspects of every server's build and maintenance, including patches.

## SOFTWARE LICENSES

### **16. Are all software licenses included?**

Most hosted Exchange providers now provide all licenses for their clients, including Windows Server Licenses, Exchange Server Licenses, Exchange Client Access Licenses (CALs), SQL Server Licenses, and Active Directory Licenses. (Only those that are SPLA signatories will also provide you with a fully licensed copy of Outlook for installation on your systems, at no extra charge.) Additionally, there remain a few service providers that are not in compliance with Microsoft regarding their licensing. You should check with your local Microsoft representative to be sure.

Additionally, please see the discussion about Service Provider License Agreements (SPLAs) in section 3, above.

### **17. What upgrades are included?**

Most incremental software upgrades and patches are included at no charge by hosted Exchange providers. Note that Microsoft makes no guarantees that license costs will not change with major version upgrades; thus your cost basis may change with upgrades.

Additionally, hosted Exchange vendors who are not SPLA signatories (see section 3 above) may not have a license agreement that enables them to upgrade their server licenses or your Client Access Licenses, including your desktop installations of Outlook.

MailStreet includes all incremental upgrades in our standard service, and works closely with Microsoft to determine any change in cost basis for major upgrades. Also, MailStreet is Microsoft SPLA signatory, meaning that we get priority access to upgrades, including alpha and beta test versions for deployment and testing in our lab. We also distribute a fully-licensed version of Outlook as part of our service, at no extra charge.

## OTHER SERVICES

### ***18. What other integrated services does the provider offer?***

Once you have selected an Exchange Provider, you should evaluate whether their suite of products and services can meet the future needs of your business. Nothing is more frustrating than having to revisit your architecture to try and integrate, or even retrofit, enterprise solutions. MailStreet can handle all of your communications needs with innovative services that grow along with your business. In addition to hosted exchange, MailStreet can

keep your employees in constant communication by adding hosted VoIP and mobile email. SharePoint Services from MailStreet, provide the ability to conveniently share information including project plans, ideas, contacts, announcements and calendars. MailStreet also offers Web Conferencing, Outlook Voice Access, Web Hosting and Secure Instant Messaging.

All MailStreet services integrate seamlessly, giving you hassle-free control, guaranteed reliability, U.S.-based live customer support and an industry-leading 99.9% Service Level Agreement (SLA).

More information about MailStreet Hosted Exchange Service can be found at [www.MailStreet.com](http://www.MailStreet.com) or call 866-461-0851

