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Storage Virtualization Moves to the Fore

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By Michael Vizard

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Upon further review, the real opportunity for solution providers might be in storage virtualization.

Everywhere you turn these days, it seems server [virtualization](#) is all the rage.

But from the perspective of the solution providers, server virtualization is a double-edged sword. On the one hand, you might be able convince customers that they need to upgrade to a new server as part of a server consolidation project enabled by virtualization. On the other hand, customers may just as likely deploy free virtualization [software](#) on their existing servers as part of an effort to forestall upgrading altogether.

Given those issues, a lot of solution providers have tended to shy away from virtualization. But upon further review, the real opportunity for solution providers might be in storage virtualization.

Rated the **No. 1 emerging technology for 2008** by readers of CIO Insight, a sister publication of Channel Insider, storage virtualization almost always requires a customer to buy something. Better still, it's a technology that can be used across physical and virtual servers simultaneously. About the only problem is that a lot of solution providers don't really understand it, so a fair amount of money gets left on the table when the solution provider fails to bring up storage virtualization alongside server virtualization.

There are multiple forms of storage virtualization that tend to add to some of the confusion surrounding the topic. There are software-only approaches, typified by companies such as **DataCore Software** that sell software that can create a virtual pool of storage across storage arrays from multiple vendors. There are also storage arrays that include **embedded virtualization capabilities from companies such as Hewlett-Packard**. And then there are **file cluster servers from companies such as HP and Exanet** that create more dynamic pools of storage.

By and large, customers looking to simply increase storage utilization tend to find software-only approaches the path of least-expensive resistance. Customers that have greater performance concerns tend to like hardware approaches, while customers that have massive scalability concerns coupled with performance issues tend to favor file clusters. Of course, DataCore is quick to point out that its software can also be deployed on a [dedicated server](#) to deal with any performance issues, so it's pretty much up to the solution provider and the customer to decide what's ultimately going to be the right way to go.

A good example of a solution provider that developed a storage virtualization practice after becoming acquainted with server virtualization software from VMware is J4 Systems, in Sacramento, Calif. As a reseller of MSA (Modular Smart Array) storage products from HP, J4 ran into some product quality issues that led it to look for some alternatives. By adopting DataCore's software, J4 found that it could much more easily deploy new hardware offerings alongside installed HP hardware products in a way that was transparent to the customer. That development also helped J4 to launch a new disaster recovery service based on the combined inherent capabilities of VMware and DataCore.

That model can be replicated pretty easily for just about any size company, which ultimately means more services opportunities for the solution provider. So the next time somebody starts talking to you about virtualization, don't forget to think first about storage.

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