

Pick-A-Prof

SoftLayer® Customer Success Story

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Who They Are

Pick-A-Prof, founded in April 2000, hosts a web site with exceptional tools for higher education students to plan their academic careers. Its constantly growing set of services includes:

- Official faculty evaluations (including faculty members' grading patterns)
- Official course schedules
- Extensive reviews and ratings of faculty and courses by students
- Schedule planners
- Degree planners
- Book exchange programs
- Integrated Facebook functionality (letting students compare their schedules with friends and connect with others in their classes)

Pick-A-Prof currently provides information for more than 400 public and private schools in the U.S., and serves more than 1 million users. Its services for individual schools are supported by direct sponsorship, user subscriptions, or online advertising (or a customized mix of all three) determined through contracts with the school or a student organization.

The company's unique approach and thoroughness produce a quality of information and services that stands out from the competition. Unlike most sites, Pick-A-Prof obtains schools' official evaluation data, collecting as much as 20 years of data for individual faculty members. This information is presented alongside reviews and ratings that students post directly to the site. Students can rate faculty members' strengths and weaknesses, and provide a personal comment, typically based on teaching and exam style, and homework load. Each review is evaluated by Pick-A-Prof's staff for its appropriateness (profanity and personal attacks against professors are not allowed) and also rated for its usefulness.

Pick-A-Prof anticipates continued exponential growth, particularly with private and community colleges. It forecasts adding as many as 500 schools to its roster in the next 18 months.

Pick-A-Prof — At A Glance

Company

Pick-A-Prof

Location

Austin, Texas

URL

www.pickaprof.com

Industry

Higher Education Student Services

Profile

An online service that provides college and university students tools for planning their academic career, including reviews and ratings of faculty and courses.

Challenge

Pick-A-Prof needed a cost-effective data center service provider that could provide the level of scalability and stability that their rapidly growing service and exceptionally high, seasonal traffic spikes demanded.

Solution

They began leveraging SoftLayer's CDNLayer™ content delivery network and automated provisioning and load-balancing solutions to gain unprecedented levels of control and flexibility.

■ Challenge

Pick-A-Prof needed to prepare for increasing expansion of its customer base and service portfolio. It faced higher utilization and availability requirements—each page Pick-A-Prof serves requires multiple database calls.

Moreover, the company needed a solution that could better manage its irregular traffic flow. Pick-A-Prof's traffic spikes at the beginning of each new academic semester, and then slowly normalizes in a series of smaller spikes spread over weeks. These jumps in usage have steadily increased in size and speed.

Pick-A-Prof began looking for a data center service provider that could help it meet these current and future needs with exceptional scalability and cost-effectiveness. The company had outgrown its previous solutions (including shared hosting, dedicated servers, and co-location). It was not interested in traditional managed hosting—it considered managed hosting overly expensive and did not want to pay for a support that its own team could handle.

■ Solution and Results

In May 2008, Pick-A-Prof selected SoftLayer and began leveraging on-demand data center services, fully-automated provisioning and load balancing, enterprise-class infrastructure, and industry-leading cost effectiveness.

"Our traffic fluctuations create scalability demands that are pretty unbelievable," says John Cunningham, President and co-founder of Pick-A-Prof. "SoftLayer lets us immediately add 20 servers, keep them for 3 weeks, and then give them back. And we can always have the latest technology without constant upgrade costs. All of that just isn't available with anyone else."

When Pick-A-Prof experienced a spike in demand coinciding with registration for the fall academic semester, the surge was anticipated but its size far exceeded expectations. Using SoftLayer's automated load balancing, Pick-A-Prof was able to move 80% of its page requests to CDNLayer within hours. The content delivery network optimizes the organization, storage, and streaming of content by pushing content geographically closer to end-users, minimizing the distance the data has to travel, avoiding network traffic jams, and decreasing latency.

"Just looking at hardware and bandwidth, without even considering the extended value of SoftLayer's innovations, they were our most cost-effective choice. So add to that the efficiencies of their automated solutions, and having their support team backing up our own, and there is no better way to go," says Mr. Cunningham. "We've tacked up SoftLayer's list of product and services and told our developers that all of these tools are now at your disposal—we can't wait to see what you can do with them."

■ About SoftLayer

Headquartered in Plano, Texas, SoftLayer delivers world-class, on-demand virtual data center services on a global basis from facilities located in Dallas, TX; Seattle, WA; and Washington, DC. SoftLayer integrates all facets of IT to innovate industry-leading solutions that are fully automated. This empowers customers with complete control, security, scalability, and ease-of-management for their IT environment.