Building a Technology of Trust

STRENGTHENING
SECURITY & SERVICE
IN ONLINE FUNDRAISING

ASCENDIO | ARMOR

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Headquarters:	Texas
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Website:	ascendio.com

When it comes to fundraising, most business ventures are sparked by passion — the urge to create positive change and transform a struggle into success.

That's especially true of Ascendio leaders Chris Mechsner and Stephen Boudreau, who co-founded a company that offers organizations of all sizes a secure and seamless path to digital fundraising.

"We work with meaningful projects for causes bigger than ourselves," Boudreau said, noting that most of Ascendio's clients are non-profits. "Our mission is to create an environment conducive to long-term fundraising for a stronger community impact."

While the online world has long been recognized as a convenient conduit for donations, many players on the technical side have simply built websites and stopped there — a tendency that has led to uneven visibility and engagement, given the mercurial nature of the Web.

Ascendio's founders saw an opportunity to set up clients for long-term success by designing powerful and intuitive fundraising tools that focused on desired outcomes. Today, Ascendio is nationally recognized for its transformation of the online fundraising experience.

"Obviously we design tools that can capture online donations and measure performance," Boudreau said. "But we strive to go beyond that and build features that help foster meaningful connections. We know our clients want to devote their energies to launching effective fundraising campaigns, so we do our best to make the online experience as smooth, fast and inviting as possible."

Raising the bar on security

While security is vital for any digital business, it's especially critical for Ascendio, which offers e-commerce features, online stores and donation systems. Financial data, names, addresses and other sensitive information flows through its networks every day, making risk reduction and Payment Card Industry (PCI) standards top priorities.

Performance is also a prominent concern, as clients must be able to count on uptime and reliable processes, as well as visibility into transactions.

"Trust is at the heart of online fundraising," said Boudreau. "Our clients and their donors need to feel assured that their personal and financial data will be protected. You can't cultivate generosity in an unstable environment — which means there's no wiggle room for risk or for bad customer service."

With expertise in both philanthropy and technology, the company found a warm reception from both large non-profits and smaller businesses when it launched.

Yet behind the scenes, Ascendio struggled to find a security partner with compliant cloud infrastructure. After the first provider failed to meet their security and performance needs, the team contracted with a second company. The problems continued.

"There were a lot of technical snafus and empty promises," said Mechsner. "Security breaches are unacceptable in our industry. We handle financial data, personal information — expert risk management is essential. But we got repeatedly attacked with propaganda, and the server got hacked and used to store porn. The provider couldn't explain how that happened, which, frankly, was frightening."

Ascendio reached out to its provider hoping for resolution but didn't receive much of a response.

"They were just concerned about profit," said Mechsner. "The lack of accountability and service made us realize how neglected we were."

Hoping the third time would be the charm, Ascendio set out again to find a provider that could offer the advanced risk reduction and performance they required.

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Chris Mechsner | Co-Founder, Ascendio

Powerful performance, reduced risk

As the team began investigating alternatives, they found Armor through a Web search.

"When we saw that they weren't a rinky-dink operation but a big deal, they moved to the top of our list," said Mechsner. "Price wasn't a deterrent; we understood that security, reliability and service are premiums and must-haves for our business."

The Ascendio team met with Armor, which showed them how its sequential layers of defense — from IP reputation filtering to DDoS prevention to application firewalling — actually boosted performance by reducing the need for bandwidth and processing power. The Ascendio team's reaction: "enormously pleased."

In August 2013, it officially launched its relationship with Armor. The team was impressed by the onboarding experience.

"They took the time to listen to our needs and understand our frustration. They explained the solutions available, then assigned a team to help us build and concept what we needed. We've never had this level of service with any vendor," Mechsner said. "Armor even gives us our own advocate who asks what we need and what's working and not working for us."

The two teams team worked closely together on both compliance and security. By providing a secure cloud that protected Ascendio's data while helping exceed compliance requirements, Armor was able to reduce Ascendio's risk — a relief to the leadership team.

"All of our financial and sensitive information is handled and hosted through Armor," Mechsner said. "Other providers expected us to be the experts, or hire a third party to handle it. But Armor's PCI compliance expertise took that headache off our plate — and it was a big selling point for our customers, too."

Armor also went beyond Ascendio's compliance needs to create a strong security program.

"It was a relief, knowing we had actual security experts and advanced controls that reduced risk and protected all our data," said Mechsner. "This was the only provider we found that offered multilayered security, real-time monitoring and threat intelligence. It ultimately becomes a competitive advantage because our customers know their donors are protected, which helps build stronger relationships."

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New horizons

Because Armor handles "all the tech magic," in the words of Boudreau, the Ascendio team has been able to return to their core passion: delivering state-of-the-art fundraising tools to its clients. The team has even been able to launch a special new project.

"We're starting another company and will use Armor for that, too," said Boudreau. "Any growth we do in this space, Armor will be our cloud partner."

"With our other providers we were treated like a small fish," added Mechsner. "With Armor, regardless of our size, we are their top priority."

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