

## Storage Solutions Brief

# Nimble Maintains Its ‘Status Grow’

Date: August 2014 Author: Mark Peters, Senior Analyst

**Abstract:** *Nimble continues to be one of an elite group of storage ingenues: It is not only interesting to industry commentators, but it is also proving valuable and compelling to end-users. Having escaped the gravitational pull that holds many startups back, its latest announcements show that Nimble also intends to expand from its initial product and target user profile to address more of the market. How is it continuing its “status grow,” and can its early success be extended as it does so? This brief covers its latest product moves and also recounts a couple of end-user stories in order to dig into what is driving Nimble’s success.*

## Nimble Storage: Its Essence and Latest Announcements

**Market:** Everyone knows a couple of key attributes of the contemporary storage market: Growth continues apace, of course, but the demands for flexibility, function, performance, and ease of use are all orders of magnitude greater than they were in the first few, more orderly, decades of IT. There was a time in the storage market when product iterations, and resultant user value, were measured simply in terms of the arrival of the next generation of hardware. While there is still a foundational game of “specification leapfrog” in the industry, these days, differential value is mainly delivered by the software functionality and support that a vendor can provide. Traditional vendors often struggle to meld their monolithic products with the demands of this new world, and this has created an opening for vendors such as Nimble. It has been gaining market traction, awards, and a raving-fan user base based upon a very attractive mix of product, abilities, and a strong community. This means it is able to not only “do the old stuff better,” but it can also offer new abilities, such as integrated data protection, flexible scalability, intuitive management, and data-sciences-driven support and management.<sup>1</sup>

**Company and Products:** Since its start in 2008, Nimble has set a new pace for early success: Its Q1’15 financial results show revenues of some \$46.5M, more than double the same quarter a year before, and the company has already exceeded 3,000 customers. On the table-stakes side, Nimble’s CS Series is a product offering with contemporary relevance, providing a solution that leverages raw storage advances that are important to buyers—flash storage, hybrid storage, support for virtual machines, convergence, etc. Underlying its technical abilities is its Cache Accelerated Sequential Layout (CASL) architecture, which intelligently uses a mix of inline compression, real-time flash caching, and high-capacity HDDs to provide a balance of necessary performance and prerequisite TCO via high utilization rates. CASL itself means that even the HDDs can deliver surprisingly good performance and the system also offers flexible scalability and can make frequent, delta-based snapshots that provide efficient levels of data protection.

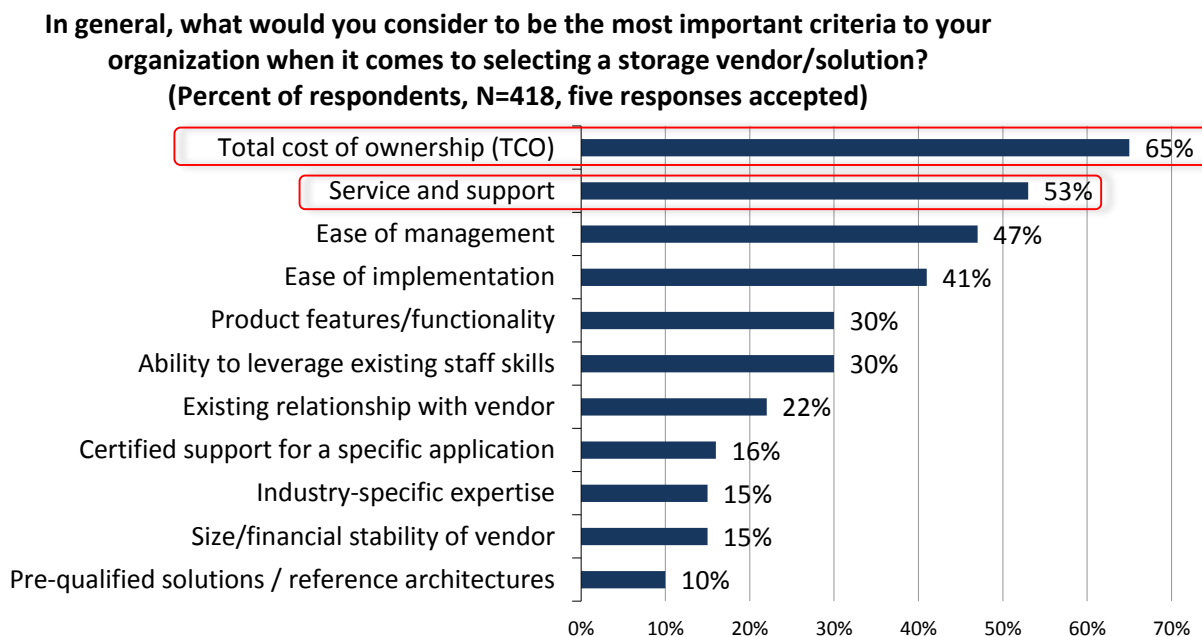
While many vendors concentrate on the technical and TCO aspects of their solutions and only pay lip service to the service and support side of the equation, Nimble has made “uber-support” an area of value-differentiation via a comprehensive model that it brands as “InfoSight.” This is not only a cloud-based monitoring system on steroids, but it also includes a genuine and working “user community,” which is helping the cult-like following that marks out many of Nimble’s users.

If there is indeed a “secret sauce” to the Nimble offering, it is this *combination* of technical acumen and support excellence. It matters for two reasons: Firstly because it has been shown to be difficult for many vendors to keep both plates spinning well; and secondly because research shows that balancing both elements is key to end-users. ESG research shows that cost reduction remains the most-cited business initiative driving current technology spending

<sup>1</sup> Some elements in this brief have been edited/adapted from other ESG sources, i.e., ESG Brief, [How Has Nimble Been So Quick?](#), August 2013, the script of a video produced for Nimble in June 2014, and a forthcoming ESG Economic Value Validation Report, to be produced August 2014.

decisions.<sup>2</sup> In concert with that, our research also shows that service and support are important to storage buyers, closely following TCO (see Figure 1).<sup>3</sup>

Figure 1. Important Criteria When Selecting Storage Vendors/Solutions



Source: Enterprise Strategy Group, 2014.

**Mid 2014 Product Release:** With CASL and InfoSight as its foundations, Nimble is now embarked on product extensions that will allow it to not only target more workloads within its existing user base, but also to expand the potential user base. Obviously the full product details are available on Nimble’s website, but the essence of the mid 2014 announcements is as follows:

- Nimble is expanding from its essentially mid-range roots by announcing both its intent and initial capabilities for the higher end storage market with a high-performance unit—the CS700—and an all-flash shelf. Combined, these provide enterprise-class scale *and* performance. Nimble is still being careful to talk about fulfilling enterprise *use* rather than claiming it can scale to be everything to the largest enterprise *users*; nonetheless, with its possible four clustered nodes, a Nimble system can provide over 500,000 sub-millisecond IOPS and roughly a petabyte of capacity.
- Nimble’s “Adaptive Flash” approach means that performance and/or capacity “identities” (in other words, storage that is tuned to dynamic business and workload needs) can coexist flexibly within the one architecture. This ability essentially permits users to choose the characteristics of an all-flash or a hybrid system...or anything in between, but without the *rigid compromise* of choosing one, or the *regrettable cost* of choosing both!

## Market Relevance, Analysis, and User Testimonials

Nimble is clearly on an excellent trajectory right now, and having a broader portfolio and capabilities—while keeping faith with its market-approach roots—can only serve to increase its growth. While Nimble’s claim of being able to serve all sorts of workloads—flexibly—from one architecture is neither new nor unique, what looks to give Nimble an edge *and* what will allow it to keep true to its essence as it grows is that its new abilities are firmly rooted in the CASL and InfoSight bedrock that it has already established. To provide a chameleon-like ability to apply storage resources

<sup>2</sup> Source ESG Research Report, [2014 IT Spending Intentions Survey](#), February 2014.

<sup>3</sup> Source: ESG Research Report, [2012 Storage Market Survey](#), November 2012.

differently as workloads and environments change—but to simultaneously also minimize TCO and maximize value—you need two key qualities:

- **Scalability:** Seamless growth without system degradation is exactly what the new CS700 allows to a greater degree than before, and what CASL manages.
- **Insight:** Beyond just monitoring itself, an ideal system would also provide optimizing recommendations for what to adjust or add (even addressing “what if?” scenarios), and this is a part of InfoSight.

Nimble’s implementation, therefore, benefits its users by simultaneously being financially efficient *and* operationally effective—in other words, providing a good return on investment (ROI). Adding to the earlier points about cost and service, ROI is something that matters intently to IT users; the good news for Nimble is that not only is purchasing new technologies with improved ROI a joint most-cited measure used by respondents to reduce or otherwise contain their IT expenditures (mentioned by 36% of respondents), but also the likelihood to deploy this measure is higher (at 44% mentions) among leading edge consumers; these consumers stay on top of current technology trends and purchase related products as soon as they available—in other words, they are prime Nimble targets.<sup>4</sup> A forthcoming ESG Economic Value Validation (EVV) Report adds specific quantified analysis to this assertion, and shows that Nimble storage can not only cost less than a typical “present mode of operation” (by requiring less equipment for a specific outcome for instance), but can also deliver much more business value (such as enhancing productivity).<sup>5</sup>

An extract from the EVV shows how users that were interviewed for the EVV research helped to quantify the scale of ROI improvement: “...our prior solution was more expensive by a factor of 2.5:1;” “...a restore which previously would have taken us five days, we were able to do in 30 minutes with Nimble.”<sup>6</sup> Another key distinction of the Nimble offering is that it not only helps to complete existing operations better, but it also provides the ability for its users to do entirely new things. The former can be viewed as adding *efficiency* and the latter as adding *effectiveness*. Again, users helped to identify such opportunities: “...our batch time went from >6 hours to under 15 minutes...which allows us to mine our data in ways we couldn’t do before.” “We get much better response times for large [SQL] queries at a lower price point, which is empowering our staff to devote their time to analytics initiatives, which just weren’t possible before.”<sup>7</sup>

**Still Work to Do:** Of course, as with any storage vendor, not everything is yet completely rosy, and all the functions that even Nimble would like delivered aren’t yet available. So as it moves increasingly mainstream, Nimble probably needs to add (even as check-box items) inline deduplication and an integrated unified/NAS capability. But right now, there is plenty of fertile market opportunity and, as the next section demonstrates, early users seem not only happy, but also happy to put all their storage eggs into the Nimble basket.

**User Testimonials:** As mentioned, it is the overall package—and “experience”—that matters to IT end-users when choosing any infrastructure components. To help flesh out this Nimble update, ESG spoke with two Nimble users to hear their stories and achievements with the product and company.<sup>8</sup>

### **Foster Pepper: Jerry Yang, CIO**

*Foster Pepper is a law firm of about 300 people based in Washington State. In terms of IT, it uses around 200 virtualized servers, and its key applications include such things as SQL, SharePoint, litigation tools for e-Discovery, and of course Exchange, which is probably the most crucial platform in the organization.*

*Foster Pepper was one of the very earliest Nimble users (and still runs serial number 101!) and it was motivated to take the risk of going to a then-largely-unknown start-up after numerous issues with its existing big brand supplier—issues that focused around snapshots, DR, and performance. Yang had a long-standing, trusting relationship with the sales person that represented Nimble. He decided to take the plunge and tried Nimble; he laughed as he recounted, “and it was just awesome.” Since then, Foster Pepper has moved to be a 100% Nimble shop for all its production; it has a mix of CS240, 260, and expansion shelves, totaling around 320TB, which is split for replication purposes between Seattle and*

<sup>4</sup> Source ESG Research Report, [2014 IT Spending Intentions Survey](#), February 2014.

<sup>5</sup> Expected to be published in August of 2014.

<sup>6</sup> This is an amalgam quote from two users, only edited for readability.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Both users were interviewed in late June 2014 by this paper’s author, specifically for this brief.

Spokane. Of course, Yang had initial early-deployer nerves and so his testing was extreme...everything from performance, snaps, code-upgrades, and replication across e-mails and databases, to extensive, pragmatic-but-extreme tests for catastrophic hardware failures, such as unplugging the physical connections between the expansion shelves and the head array. "I did some really crazy testing....to try to make it die, but it just temporarily froze, the ESX server and hypervisor didn't die, and everything came back just fine as soon as I plugged things back....it's magic!" He finds everyone at Nimble to be "caring, interactive, and proactive," for example, using InfoSight to give him "valuable system recommendations."

In terms of operational impact, Yang was also very happy: For example, the efficiency of Nimble's snapshots had allowed him to stop making traditional file level backups...thereby saving not only the budget he used to spend with the backup software vendor, but also allowing the prior full-time backup administration role to be cut (although the last person in that role has actually transferred internally at Foster Pepper to more productive work). Backups were one example area where prior performance and availability had at times been poor, impacting billable work; the new snap-based approach doesn't have any such noticeable impact. And more generally, added Yang, "Performance was a huge increase. I no longer have to go to internal groups and ask them what applications are less important to them so that I can move them over to SATA drives!" Another dramatic improvement is in his DR: With the prior vendor, DR simply wasn't viable because the seeding-based replications that Yang wanted were not supported. "Doing it the way they suggested would've taken me around six months!" To put it succinctly, said Yang, "Without Nimble, my DR projects would never have been completed."

And what do his users notice? With Nimble, "performance is never an issue, and file recovery is much faster via snapshots. The full process for recovering a file has dropped from three to four hours under the old methods to maybe just 20 minutes with Nimble".

### **Corona-Norco Unified School District: Brian Troudy, Director, Network and Infrastructure, Information Technology**

This K-12 school district in Southern California consists of some 50 schools, 56,000 students, and 5,500 staff, which, by size, puts it in the top ten school districts in California and the top 100 in the US. It also demands a substantial IT investment to handle the load of around 35,000 devices, 300+ servers, and over 2,000 virtual machines; there's a "one-stop-shop" IT team of 24 covering everything from infrastructure to support to applications. These human resources can get stretched pretty thin as one might imagine—for example, the main infrastructure group is just three people.

Corona-Norco USD has used Nimble for about two years; a strong sales relationship led to Troudy agreeing to try a "demo box" and, as he put it, "I quickly noticed that the single Nimble box not only did everything that the existing large racks of equipment were doing, but it was doing it all better." By "better," Troudy explained he had more than quadrupled the prior performance, "...and buying Nimble was immediately a no-brainer." That initial foray two years ago has led to a 100% switch to Nimble storage, with around 250TB in total, and includes Nimble in the DR site. He has been successfully running the latest CS700 for about four months (that is, ahead of the official launch) and it will soon be added to the existing production Nimble cluster.

In terms of operational impact, Nimble has enabled a complete storage consolidation, which "dramatically reduces our management overhead to support the infrastructure." To make this measurable Troudy added, "The ability I now have to not worry about storage is huge...I can get in and out of my storage management platform in ten minutes or less." And he explained that's only ten minutes "maybe weekly"—whereas his team used to have to manage the prior storage systems for one to two hours per week at a minimum. Furthermore, Troudy loved the easy implementation: "Even when I get a new Nimble array, I can have the pallet show up at my door, have it physically moved, and then racked in the data center, turned on, and be hosting storage in less than an hour."

When asked if using Nimble Storage had helped his users directly, Troudy was emphatic: "Absolutely! Not only am I able to deliver faster applications to the end-users, but the platform allows us to leverage infrastructure to change how we do daily business: We run VDI and that simply wasn't possible prior to Nimble." Unlike some VDI efforts which stall in the cold light of day, at this school district, "staff members are chomping at the bit because they can't get enough of it."

Finally, as to the support, Troudy finds it proactive, invaluable...and balanced: For example, InfoSight—which he finds excellent for forecasting needs and impacts—has shown their cache read-hit ratio is good enough that they don't yet

need the all-flash shelf. Overall he could not be happier: “The support is fantastic...and unlike any other vendor I’ve ever experienced.”

## The Bigger Truth

The new announcements by Nimble extend its ability to gain share, both in its existing user base (in terms of what workloads can go on Nimble Storage) and to new prospective users (by offering a portfolio that covers more of the overall storage needs). By continuing to build on its CASL and InfoSight foundations, Nimble is playing to its strengths and maximizing its chance of success. Clearly, its market traction to date, bolstered by enthusiastic customer reports, suggests that it has—at least for now—found a winning formula.

Despite considerable standardization of many of the underlying basic components, Nimble has concentrated on an overall product package that emphasizes and meets contemporary user needs; including such things as extensive and simple integration into users’ IT ecosystems, and adding value by providing an enhanced user experience. While these qualitative statements are themselves compelling, many users have to go beyond the “operationally desirable” and quantitatively prove the “business value” (ROI) of potential IT investments, and Nimble has got proof of that, too.

It is a part of human nature to always ask, “What next?” and certainly Nimble will need a “second act” before too long—it could be an acquisition target (its revenue is not so big yet but it is likely verging on becoming really annoying to the “big dog” vendors) or it could concentrate on being even more of a complete storage vendor. That said, there’s an awfully big base for it to aim at for now—a base where the incumbent vendors very often struggle to give the sort of package, service, experience, ROI, and sheer “cool” factor that Nimble does. There seems no reason to expect anything other than the “status grow” for Nimble.