

The Most Powerful Name in Corporate News

Unlimited Support Cloud Service Provider



Eric Mandel
CEO

CEOCFO: *Mr. Mandel, what is the idea behind BlackMesh?*

Mr. Mandel: BlackMesh is a service company. We are a cloud service provider, or what most people think of as a managed hosting firm. We provide very high end, hands-on, unlimited support. Since we are a service company, what matters is that we provide uptime reliability and – most importantly – enable customers to focus on what they do: run their business and perform their job without having to worry about things that are necessary for them to do their job, such as infrastructure and maintenance. We want our customers to focus on what interests them. That is our service model.

CEOCFO: *Would you give us an example of how your service is over and above the standard?*

Mr. Mandel: I like to over-communicate. While there is a science to BlackMesh's computers, for example performance tuning and optimization, making all of the pieces work together properly is an art, particularly when these pieces are coming from multiple organizations and development groups. With so many different and moving pieces, communication is essential. Therefore, we are very adept at bringing everyone together – whether it is getting on the phone or in a chat room or Google Hangouts; but making sure the entire team is able to connect and work together is what's important. We are very big on owning the issue, and we realize the importance of getting things definitively resolved and put to bed so that customers do not have to keep coming back to their issues. For example, we recently had one of our customers experience an issue in which traffic spikes were causing unexpected slowness and time out errors on their websites; they were not sure why it was happening. BlackMesh was able to work with them and identify the queries causing the bottlenecks; this is not typically a hosting company's responsibility. Though these were not infrastructure related, BlackMesh recognized the importance of communicating with the client to identify the issue. In doing so, our team managed to resolve the issue quickly, and to the customer's satisfaction.

CEOCFO: *Are people turning to BlackMesh because they understand the depth of your offering, or is it more that they are often pleasantly surprised to learn that you do go above and beyond?*

Mr. Mandel: Most of the time, the people are pleasantly surprised to see how much we do. When we talk with customers they will say, "Oh, wow, that's great that is included," or "I did not know that you did that." Those are common reactions for new customers and first experiences with BlackMesh. For others, most of our growth is organic and referral based. Therefore, for those people, our depth of knowledge and superior service is what they have come to expect. Though a developer may move from one contract to another, periodically working with new agencies and development companies, they know they can always come back to BlackMesh and get the level of service they expect and need.

CEOCFO: *What types of companies or organizations tend to use your service?*

Mr. Mandel: BlackMesh works with everyone whose online presence is important to them. We work with website owners and content providers such as newspapers, magazines, schools, universities, and associations; we work with Fortune 500 companies; we work with non-profits; we work with the Federal government. We recently received our FedRAMP certification, which is the highest security certification the government awards cloud service providers. Because of our FedRAMP certification, we are working more and more with federal agencies – and even some state and local agencies – that require FedRAMP or view the FedRAMP certification as their security benchmark.

CEOCFO: *Is it typical for federal agencies to outsource or to use MSPs, or is it still a little ahead of the game for them?*

Mr. Mandel: Outsourcing and using MSPs is becoming more and more common and acceptable. While there are definitely still some agencies that want to keep their servers onsite and provide support internally, the trend today is for agencies to begin outsourcing their projects. We are seeing this transition accelerate, especially for public-facing websites built on the latest open-source technologies.

CEOCFO: *What are some of the challenges working with the government on all levels?*

Mr. Mandel: One of the biggest challenges is understanding all of the different people and components that need to be involved in getting the work done. Though it is unfortunately easy to leave some out of the process, it is essential to ensure all stakeholders are heard from the beginning – otherwise, they may have to come in later and slow down the work effort. The biggest thing BlackMesh does to address this is to be proactive. We like to over-communicate. We like to work with people to make sure plans are being followed. Considering the security and FedRAMP certification aspects, there are a lot of controls and processes in place that have to be followed. Therefore, we are working with people to make sure that those processes are also being adhered to by the right people. While it is often a technology problem that BlackMesh is solving, on some levels, it is still a people problem in understanding and making sure the right people are involved at the right times to be able to make crucial decisions.

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CEOCFO: *What are the intangibles that you look for in your people? How do you know how much technical jargon any one client can take - where you have to tell them too much or not enough?*

Mr. Mandel: It is a balancing act. You have to have relationships with clients and understand that sometimes the client wants the low level technical details. They want the nitty gritty. They want to understand what commands were used, why you used those commands, and why you selected the options you did. Other people just want to know it works. We try to know and understand our customers well enough to know where that level of detail is for each of them and how much they want – we try to provide enough information without going at a level above or below what they are interested in. When I am looking for people to join our team, the biggest thing we are looking for is passion, intelligence, and a desire to learn; we want someone who loves computers, loves the challenge of a new problem and the satisfaction of solving it. Technology changes so quickly that it is as important to be able to learn new things as it is to know things. From that perspective, I think BlackMesh has achieved a very good team of people that really are passionate about what they do. That goes back to the notion that we go above and beyond, and our goal of being accountable and making sure the problem is solved. We want to do the work right the first time, because that is how we would want it done if we were doing it for ourselves. At the end of the day, that has always got to be a service provider’s mentality.

CEOCFO: *Are you able to work proactively with many of your clients to be ahead of the game in what they and potential problems?*

Mr. Mandel: That is always a challenge. Our goal is always to be proactive, but there will always be the need to be reactive because something went wrong. We have monitoring and alerts set up so we can watch for trends and stay ahead of problems; for instance, a client site whose traffic continues to grow. We see server metrics such as CPU utilization, server load, and page load times, so we are able to tell the client how long they have on their current trend before they are going to run out of resources – whether it is CPU or disk space or whatever it may be. Another example is that we do hardware refreshes every couple of years. We will call a customer and say: “You have been with us for a couple of years, it is time to move you to something newer, faster, and better.” As new technologies emerge, they often require more and more resources, and customers appreciate that sort of engagement. Because some of our customers are using certain modules or applications that have been installed, it is important to know new versions of these modules and applications are available, so we may say to our client: “You may want to take a look at this. It has performance improvements, gives you more control, and better security.” Because a service provider needs to verify and test new software and give customers a heads up of what is coming and what we want to implement for them, the relationship really becomes a partnership. I like that people think of us as their in-house infrastructure and IT team, and that for anything they would walk down the hall and ask their own team member about, they could pick up the phone and ask BlackMesh as well.

CEOCFO: *How do you help your clients with security?*

Mr. Mandel: I have found that security really is client specific. There are some clients that are very security conscious, but they are the exception. Most people, however, are aware of security issues, yet know there are PR concerns with security.

Security is applied in layers and really is just risk mitigation. One of the running jokes in IT is, “If you really want a server to be secure, unplug it and disconnect it from the internet.” It can’t do anything, but it’s secure. Since that is not a realistic mindset, security is understanding what risks you face and where you stand on risk mitigation. For example, we have network layers to monitor and handle things like traffic anomalies and user controls at the host level to maintain accessibility. We believe there should always be a firewall in front of everything to minimize the attack surface. We have standard security implementation and controls from the network layer (which includes multiple levels) to the host level. These measures are in place so our engineers know how to interact with our clouds and customers – specifically in regard to things such as policies on transmitting passwords. Security is implemented in layers, but it is a very systemic thing to accomplish as a company. We have to make sure that we are diligent about it at all times; something our security officer is very good at reminding and teaching us about. I feel like he is paid to be paranoid, so he is going to be paranoid.

CEOCFO: *What have you learned along the way? What is different today than maybe two or three years ago?*

Mr. Mandel: Much is different, particularly in terms of customer expectations and needs. Cloud became one of those words that everyone said solved everything. “We will put it in the cloud,” and “The cloud is infinite and it is always up,” and so on. Four or five years ago before we first started selling cloud services, people would always ask, “Do you sell cloud?” I would say, “Absolutely! What is your definition of cloud?” I got very different answers, ranging from, “Not on my location,” to “Highly available, highly scalable, and knows what I want ahead of time.” There was a wide variety. That has been one of the biggest changes; people’s expectations and understanding of what technology can do and how to best use it. Also, understanding the different technologies that keep coming up, such as new tools and performance.

CEOCFO: *If we talk a year from now, what might be different for you?*

Mr. Mandel: I hope we do get to talk again a year from now, because on an implementation and logistical level, I think BlackMesh is going to be doing many more government focused activities because of the FedRAMP certification and general interest in improved security. This upcoming year is going to be a very exciting time for us. In the technology space, you will continue to see consolidation around the Managed Service Providers, technologies, virtualization, OpenStack, and big data. Virtualization is getting more and more granular at the container level. More and more data is coming online. The Internet of Things (IoT) is going to introduce a whole new level of data. Those are some of the major trends that will continue to happen for the next couple of years. I do not think they will be complete in that time, but they will definitely make some progress.

CEOCFO: *Why should people choose BlackMesh?*

Mr. Mandel: People should choose BlackMesh because we are a service company that is going to make sure your business and technical needs are aligned, solved, and handled correctly the first time, so that you can focus on your business. One catchphrase we use, and is even on one of our T-shirts is: “We offer a SERVICE that gives you 24 hour SUPPORT, so you can SLEEP at night.” This statement perfectly captures the idea that we provide people stability so they do not have to worry about the infrastructure. People know BlackMesh has best practices. They know we have the architecture they need. They know they can pick up the phone and call our team at any time to work together. That’s why people really like to work with us; we can customize solutions to what they need and can provide a plausible way to meet their timeframe, budget, and IT needs.

Interview conducted by: Lynn Fosse, Senior Editor, CEOCFO Magazine



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