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What infrastructure should I use for my startup?
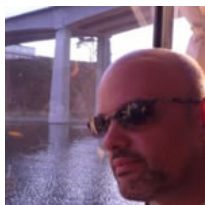
by **Chris Maresca (http://www.chrismaresca.com/)**

In the past year, I've worked with a lot of startups and the one recurring thing I notice is the amount of time people spend worrying about basic infrastructure. So, here's my roundup of the stuff I've used, recommended and would use again for my next project:

(http://www.founderspace.com /wp-content/uploads /2011/07/Chris-Maresca.jpeg)

Chris Maresca

Mail, Calendaring, Doc Sharing

Hands down, **Google Apps for Domains (http://www.google.com/apps/intl/en/business/index.html)** wins. Yes, it's the evil empire, but your other choices are unfortunately crappy or lots of work. I use it in conjunction with **Thunderbird (http://www.mozillamessaging.com/en-US /thunderbird/)** and **Lighting (https://addons.mozilla.org/en-US/thunderbird/addon /lightning/)** (right mouse click, Convert to: Event – that rules!), so I rarely ever login other than to work on docs or upload stuff. Also, easy to sync to mobile devices – which is key.

On very, VERY important side-effect of Google Apps for Domain is the incredible variety of marketplace apps. And that ecosystem has one feature that rules them all – single signon. Yeah, I know, there are three of you and you don't need it – but when you grow, you WILL need it.

For this to work properly, it's best to signup for apps through the Google marketplace – thus making you even MORE beholden to them.

Sales Tracking, CRM, Invoicing

For sales tracking and CRM, I use **CapsuleCRM (https://capsulecrm.com/)** . There are others, like **Pipeline Deals (http://www.pipelinedeals.com/)** ,**Highrise (http://www.highrisehq.com/)** and others which are equally competent, just pick one that works for you.

For simple invoicing, **FreshBooks (http://www.freshbooks.com/)** rocks. It's even useful as a minor expense tracking tool. If you need to do more complex invoicing, or for a lot of customers, take a look at **Chikpea (http://www.chikpea.com/)** .

Hosting, CMS

I have this blog and my company website hosted at **ServInt (http://www.servint.com/)** , both are running on **WordPress (http://www.wordpress.org/)** , which I highly

recommend for relatively static sites with few editors. If you need more capabilities, I would look at Cloud Access's **hosted Joomla (http://www.cloudaccess.net/)** service. Both WordPress and Joomla are great as they have tons of plugins and large communities, making it relatively easy to build complex sites quickly.   However, be aware that future upgrades may not be smooth if you find some of the plugins you use have been abandoned by their authors….

Of course, neither of these necessarily have everything you need to develop a web-based offering, but they do really well in semi-static sites that are usually put up while developing something else. I use **CloudFlare (http://www.cloudflare.com/)** to protect my sites (along with mod_security and some other things). They also provide an interesting checkpoint to Google Analytics or other metrics packages.

If you have extended hosting needs, I've used the same hosting company, **Voxel.net (http://www.voxel.net/)** , for my last 3 companies and would use them again in a heartbeat. They've recently developed a hybrid managed hosting + on-demand cloud scaling which would work well for a lot of startups. I've also used **Softlayer (http://www.softlayer.com/)** successfully, but watch out for their extremely aggressive policies if you miss a payment. I had a card expire while traveling and a site was down for 2 days as a result.   Not good.

Yes, I know, you could use EC2 or some other cloud service – but, realistically, most sites will not have enough traffic on the corporate brochure-ware site to justify the overhead of using such services.   And, yes, it shold probably be separate from your main app if you are web based.

Accounting

In the past I've used **Outright (http://www.outright.com/)** , but I switched to **Xero (http://www.xero.com/)** as they have a more complete solution. I generally dislike **Quickbooks (http://www.quickbooks.com/)** , but that seems to be everyone's default. For expenses, I have a **PayPal card (https://personal.paypal.com/us/cgi-bin/?cmd=_render-content&content_ID=marketing_us/debit_card)** and I write expense details on every receipt.

Some people swear by **Expensify (http://www.expensify.com/)** , but I seem to keep track of expenses just fine without resorting to it.

Analytics

Besides **Google Analytics (http://www.google.com/analytics/)** , I've used **ClickTale (http://www.clicktale.com/)** , which is very useful in understanding what people are looking for on a particular page. This led us to reduce the Concept32 site to just one page instead of having a lot of content no one was actually interested in.

Collaboration

A tough nut to crack.   I've tried a number of tools, but none seem to actually pull people in.   I really like **TeamBox (http://www.teambox.com/)** , but others like **Basecamp (http://www.basecamp.com/)** better.   This is really dependent on how people work and how much structure/process is needed.   I would point out that I've recently had to manage some much larger projects, and **OpenProj (http://www.openproj.org/)** has been really helpful.   I'm also exploring using **Smartsheet (http://www.smartsheet.com/)** to make these planning docs more widely available.

Other Stuff

As everyone else, I have a pile of tools I rely on all the time.   Like **Prezi (http://www.prezi.com/)** (quick, good looking presos), **TweetDeck (http://www.tweetdeck.com/)** (social media tracking), **Toktumi (http://www.toktumi.com/)** (virtual PBX), **eFax (http://www.efax.com/)** (duh).   Backups are also critical. I use **Crashplan (http://www.crashplan.com/)** , which is multi-platform (Win, Mac, Linux, Solaris) unlike a lot of solutions. They are also in Minnesota and cashflow positive with no venture funding, both of which are great stability indicators.   Some others use **BackBlaze (http://www.backblaze.com/)** with success, but they are in the same geo as me, something I'd rather avoid.

All The Other Things…

Of course, this does nothing to address wider issues around building a startup, particularly scaling systems, process, delivery methods, etc. But the point is to first implement a usable and relatively scalable base infrastructure – something you will not need to worry about for some time.

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