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iSCSI Hikes Its Nielsen Rating

TV ratings company [Nielsen Media Research](#) finally considers iSCSI ready for primetime in its heterogeneous SAN.

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Nielsen is using an [Intrinsa Inc.](#) iSCSI system in its new fourth storage tier, with more gear from Intrinsa and a second iSCSI vendor – probably [EqualLogic Inc.](#) – to follow. Nielsen technology strategist Rob Stevenson says he plans to connect iSCSI systems to a virtual tape library for archiving.

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Stevenson had to be convinced about IP SANs, though. He always liked the price, but with 1.2 Pbytes (yes, that's petabytes) of research data to store and more than 250 Tbytes per month to back up, he couldn't sacrifice too much performance. After all, without Nielsen's data, we'd never know how many people watch *Desperate Housewives* on a given week.

Stevenson considered iSCSI back in September 2003, when Nielsen consolidated its storage system from multiple sites into a 20,000-square-foot data center in Oldsmar, Fla. (see [Nielsen Media Research](#)). But he didn't like the industry buzz he heard about iSCSI at the time: that its performance wasn't up to snuff, mainly because the drivers were unstable.

"I initially thought iSCSI would be a good solution because of cost," he says. "Unfortunately, I didn't hear much good about iSCSI back then. People were very dismissive of it."

When he attended a tradeshow last April, Stevenson talked to bold iSCSI pioneers who had positive experiences with IP SANs (see [Panel Prompts iSCSI Love-In](#)). He decided to check it out himself.

"That's when I first started changing my opinion of iSCSI," he says. "I didn't do any lab work until then. I had been looking for a good archive system, and the economics

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were too compelling to ignore.”

Overall, he says he finds iSCSI easy to set up and use, with an acceptable performance. “I’m feeling a lot more comfortable with iSCSI,” he says. “It’s easy to work with, easy to configure.”

Stevenson likes to use two vendors for each tier of storage. For his archiving tier, he looked at equipment from EqualLogic, Intransa, and [LeftHand Networks Inc.](#) He decided Intransa and EqualLogic performed best, and also says Intransa’s clustered architecture will make it easy to add storage.

Nielsen has a midrange Intransa IP5500 installed with a higher-capacity (up to 32-Tbyte) IP7500 coming soon (see [IP SANs Are Sizzling](#) and [Intransa Rolls Out IP SAN](#)). The company also runs an entry-level EqualLogic PSA50E in its lab, and Stevenson says he’s “leaning toward” EqualLogic as his second iSCSI vendor (see [EqualLogic Expands SAN Line](#)).

One thing: Stevenson doesn’t expect iSCSI to rival Fibre Channel’s performance, at least until affordable 10-Gbit/s Ethernet is available, and that could still be years away. So three tiers of Fibre Channel SANs remain entrenched in Nielsen’s data center. Here’s how each is defined:

- **Tier 1:** This is mission-critical storage, consisting of [EMC Corp.](#) (NYSE: EMC - [message board](#)) Symmetrix and [Hitachi Data Systems \(HDS\)](#) Lightning. This data requires immediate restoration in case of failure.
- **Tier 2:** So-called “business-critical” storage, a step down from mission-critical but still important. This tier includes applications that can afford to be out for a short time. Nielsen uses EMC Clariion and [Storage Technology Corp. \(StorageTek\)](#) (NYSE: STK - [message board](#)).
- **Tier 3:** This is non-critical storage on low-end [Sun Microsystems Inc.](#) (Nasdaq: SUNW - [message board](#)) and EMC Clariion gear.
- **Tier 4:** This is the archiving tier, comprising data stored for future retrieval as needed. This is Intransa equipment, as noted, with a possible EqualLogic addition.

Equipment from other vendors is on the way, too. Stevenson expects to add a virtual tape library to help facilitate backup. He’s considering hardware from [MaXXan Systems Inc.](#) and [Copan Systems Inc.](#) to run [FalconStor Software Inc.](#) (Nasdaq: FALC - [message board](#)) VirtualTape Library (VTL) software (see [FalconStor, Copan Partner](#) and [MaXXan Unveils New Virtual Tape Systems](#)). Stevenson also plans to connect the virtual tape system to the Intransa IP7500 to create a duplicate data warehouse for his developers to access. To further reduce cost in his data center, Stevenson is keeping his eye on SATA II and SAS drives – both expected later this year (see [Report: SATA & SAS to Share Systems](#) and [Interoperability Lab Plugs SAS](#)).

Nielsen uses [AppIQ Inc.](#) StorageAuthority Suite to manage the data across tiers, mainly because it’s based on the Storage Management Interface Specification (SMI-S) created by the [Storage Networking Industry Association \(SNIA\)](#). (See [AppIQ Enhances Family](#).) “All our tiers have to be SNIA SMI-S compliant and go through testing,” Stevenson says.

— Dave Raffo, Senior Editor, [Byte and Switch](#)

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