

# A Lesson In Elastic Provisioning: That's One Expensively Free Dr. Pepper



Alan Murphy, 2008-24-11

For those who follow the music business, or for anyone that just reads and/or watches the news, you'll know that 80's metal icons Guns n' Roses finally released the much anticipated "Chinese Democracy" album on Sunday, Nov. 23rd, 2008. I say finally because we've been waiting on it for years. Every year just before Christmas rumors began to fly about a possible release date that year. And this year was no different than other years; those of us that were actually looking forward to this release hedged our bets once again and said "Sure, I'll believe it when I see it," including [Dr. Pepper](#). Who even knew the Dr. was a Guns fan?



See way back in March of '08, Dr. Pepper ran a campaign – if Chinese Democracy came out this year, anyone who wanted one would get a free 20oz bottle of Dr. Pepper. I'm assuming Axl took that as a throwdown challenge because he delivered, leaving the Dr. to start giving out free bottles. The Dr. came through on their end of the bargain and opened up their website for the free 20oz requests for 24 hours, only valid on the day Chinese Democracy hit shelves, Nov. 23rd. The official word came down about 2 months ago that indeed, Democracy would actually drop as expected (with distribution and promo details to back it up), leaving the great Dr. ~2 months to plan for the onslaught of freebie requests. If we know anything about humanity it's that no one can say no to "Free."

I'm not sure what Dr. Pepper was expecting with their offer, but it certainly didn't plan for the flood of internet traffic that would be directed their way beginning at 12:01 AM EST on the 23rd. Within hours their site became unresponsive, going through phases of availability: first, the intro Flash got stuck with no way to skip past it; then they finally caught on and started redirecting all users to a text-only portion of the site where the "Free Dr. Pepper" link was buried way down at the bottom which directed to a page that wouldn't load; and finally, the coup de grace, the entire site went down and was returning nothing more than a 503 Service Unavailable error. As of this writing, we're still at 503, and I'm still sans a Dr.

*This very temporary unplanned (well, they had two months to plan, but let's stick with un- for a second) outage is a textbook case for elastic provisioning: spinning up services infinitely to address temporary need and then spinning those services back down when traffic returns to normal levels.* It's like cable or satellite Video on Demand requests spiking during a snow storm on a Friday night. Services that normally handle X amount of traffic are suddenly forced to handle exponentially larger volumes of traffic, typically unexpectedly, but they still need to deliver that service.

To give them the benefit of the doubt, maybe Dr. Pepper didn't anticipate the massive traffic volumes brought on by every major news source in the country picking up on the Gn'R bet, but that's the point of elastic provisioning: accommodating service need **without anticipating fixed levels**. All they needed was the ability to scale for 24 hours, then things could have been returned to normal. After the 24-hours, a simple splash page could have been displayed stating that the offer was over and directing their real website traffic to the original site via a click-through. [Caching](#) that notice page with a [BIG-IP LTM](#) could have kept probably 99% of the traffic off the real site until the hype died down by delivering that notice directly from [LTM](#), and [throttling](#) the non-legitimate site requests, rather than putting the load back on the web servers themselves.

So what went wrong? How much is this free offer (which has now been extended 18 hours, although it doesn't matter if the site is still down) going to ultimately cost them in marketing, name, and not so good press? I'm guessing less than it would have cost to spin up a temporary site with the free offer that could scale for 24 hours.

And this one hits home: I rarely drink soda today but do have fond memories of the Pepper; I was looking forward to throwing on some 80's hair metal and kicking back like I was in 7th grade again. But the Dr. teased me; they offered and didn't deliver. At least Axl finally did, but I'm not waiting 17 years for a free Dr. Pepper; I'll stick to coffee. :)

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