



# Investing

BY RICH FREEMAN

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*Photograph by Paul Sutherland*

Building a foundation for expansion: Neil Manning (left), head of IT security and infrastructure for FNZ, and Damian Millin, the company's chief operating officer.

# in the future

The financial web platform outsourcer, FNZ, proves that building a solid network foundation now is the key to prospering later.

**F**inancial advisers have been saying it for ages: No one plans to fail. They simply fail to plan.

The importance of planning ahead is why people invest in insurance policies, retirement accounts, and college savings plans. It's also why fast-growing FNZ, of Wellington, New Zealand, takes Application Delivery Networking so seriously.

Founded just four years ago, FNZ operates the financial services industry's most complete third-party online account management service. Called a "wrap" platform, FNZ's technology lets investors and brokers manage an entire portfolio through a single portal. Banks, securities firms, and insurers—including heavyweights like Bank of New Zealand and the United Kingdom's Standard Life—use customized versions of FNZ's

#### RATINGS CHAMP

Leading financial institutions such as United Kingdom-based Standard Life plc aren't the only fans of FNZ's wrap platform. Finance industry observers are taking notice too. In May 2007, the Financial Technology Research Centre, a respected e-commerce consultancy headquartered in London, awarded Standard Life's FNZ-powered wrap service its coveted "eee" rating for the second straight year. That makes Standard Life's wrap product the first—and so far only—such offering to earn triple-e status, which the research group awards solely to powerful, reliable, and user-friendly finance sites.

infrastructure in place of building their own. FNZ not only provides all of the software and hosting, but also handles back-end trading and settlement. "We're the only people who do that," says Adrian Durham, the company's CEO.

Today some 110,000 investors in the United Kingdom and New Zealand count on FNZ-powered web sites for help in planning their financial future. Serving so many people might have been impossible had FNZ not done some advance planning of its own. Thanks in part to F5's BIG-IP system and other F5 solutions, the company equipped itself from the outset to supply an expanding customer base with fast, reliable, and secure access to financial data.

#### Getting ready for the big time

FNZ's wrap platform originated as a custom solution developed by the Wellington-based investment bank and brokerage house, First NZ Capital Ltd., for its own use. Launched six years ago, the system was an instant hit, and before long company

executives realized that it might be equally popular with other financial institutions looking to introduce wrap offerings of their own. First NZ Capital turned its wrap division into a wrap services outsourcer, which it eventually spun off as FNZ.

Job one for the new business was bolstering its infrastructure to support hundreds of banking, securities, and insurance companies. FNZ knew that such organizations would insist on robust performance, as few investors have patience for a sluggish web site. “It has to be fast or they won’t use it,” says Damian Millin, FNZ’s chief operating officer. Moreover, consumers demand 24/7 access to their accounts, so maintaining continuous uptime would also be critical. “If the system is down for any period, we’re in trouble,” Millin observes.

Millin charged Neil Manning, FNZ’s head of IT security and infrastructure, with preparing the company’s wrap systems for wider commercial usage. Manning quickly turned to F5’s BIG-IP system for help. “It became obvious early on that we would need better load balancing,” he recalls. Not only that, but he had once worked for one of F5’s top New Zealand resellers, so he was familiar with the impact F5 products can have on performance and reliability.

Today, Manning uses the BIG-IP system in a variety of roles. BIG-IP Local Traffic Manager (LTM) helps him keep response times down by distributing traffic evenly across FNZ’s web servers. The BIG-IP Global Traffic Manager (GTM) module helps him maintain nonstop uptime by enabling seamless failover among FNZ’s four data centers in New Zealand and Scotland. And BIG-IP Link Controller prevents slow or severed ISP connections from inconveniencing customers. “If an ISP wants to do some major work on its network, we just shut it down and all of the traffic flows on the other ISPs,” Manning says.

Together, all of those F5 products are producing impressive results, notes Matthew Moore, a senior pre-sales engineer at F5 who supports FNZ. “FNZ was able to deliver a complete, fully customized service to market rapidly, while still maintaining availability and a great end-user experience,” says Moore. “The choice to employ our products as building blocks helped it expand from New Zealand into the European market far more quickly and easily.”

### One-step risk mitigation

Of course, in the financial services industry, security is every bit as big a concern as availability. “It is absolutely critical,”

says Durham. “If we had a single case where anyone’s personal information became accessible to somebody who shouldn’t see it, I believe we’d basically be out of business.”

Not surprisingly, then, when a routine security audit early in FNZ’s history revealed a number

of vulnerabilities that are fairly common to financial web sites, Manning acted quickly. At the time, however, the company was in the midst of a furious growth spurt. “We were building web

sites at a phenomenal rate—two or three a month,” Manning explains. Reassigning developers to security-related chores would have put the brakes on that work. Instead, Manning installed BIG-IP Application Security Module (ASM), a web application firewall that keeps all but anticipated and authorized Internet transactions outside a company’s defensive perimeter.

The payoff was immediate. Thanks to ASM, none of the previously detected weaknesses showed up in FNZ’s next audit.

“We know there are some vulnerabilities in the web site, but to fix the code is a huge cost,” Manning observes. “To put ASM in front of the site and have it mitigate our risk makes my life a lot easier.” ASM’s detailed transaction logs also expose threats that would be difficult to see otherwise, helping FNZ identify and block potential hackers before they can damage the company’s sites.

### Company-wide standard

FNZ’s experiences with its BIG-IP system have inspired it to deploy additional F5 products. The company now uses WANJet, F5’s wide-area network optimization appliance, to accelerate traffic flows—and encrypt them as well. “Lots of our traffic is confidential. [WANJet] gives us that extra level of security,” Manning says. FNZ also uses F5’s FirePass SSL VPN appliance to help employees working offsite securely connect with network resources back at headquarters. Today, in fact, F5 solutions are FNZ’s company-wide standard for Application Delivery Networking. “Out of all the vendors I deal with, F5 [is] probably the most responsive,” Manning says. “The sales team in New Zealand has always been very proactive in helping us solve problems.”

For his part, Moore hails FNZ for being equally proactive. From the start, the company has taken the long view when making architectural decisions. “FNZ used a lot of foresight and really built a foundation that enabled it to grow,” Moore says. It’s a good thing, too, because FNZ has ambitious plans for continued expansion in Europe, Canada, and Asia. “Our aim is to get this product out to as many people as we can as fast as we can,” says Millin. That means FNZ’s core applications can expect to find rising workloads for years to come. “Every 12 months we’ll need to double the number of transactions [we process],” Millin predicts. He’s convinced that, thanks to its BIG-IP system and other F5 solutions, FNZ’s infrastructure will be up to the challenge. \*

### THRIFT, KIWI STYLE

Since its birth as an independent provider of third-party wrap services, FNZ has been steadily adding new F5 products to its infrastructure. But it has also been diligently seeking ways to squeeze maximum value out of products it already has. “[The] BIG-IP [system] has all these extra bits that we didn’t use at first,” notes Neil Manning, the company’s head of IT security and infrastructure. For example, FNZ now uses code written in F5’s iRules scripting language to automatically cache logos and other images, so its web servers don’t have to load the same bulky graphics over and over. “That probably increased performance tenfold,” says Manning. He notes that fully exploiting existing systems before buying new ones is a “Kiwi” approach to IT.

### Additional resources

FNZ home page: [www.fnz.co.nz](http://www.fnz.co.nz)

For more information about the “eee” rating awarded to Standard Life’s FNZ-powered wrap site: [http://ukgroup.standardlife.com/content/news/new\\_articles/2007/wrap\\_first\\_birthday.xml](http://ukgroup.standardlife.com/content/news/new_articles/2007/wrap_first_birthday.xml)