



“We select our technology partners carefully,” says Evan Jafa, CTO of The First American Corporation. The partner chosen to help simplify First American’s IT environment during a massive overhaul of its infrastructure is F5, which Jafa calls “a great company.”

BY RICH FREEMAN

Photographs by Joe Toreno

Working relationship

With close support from F5, business information giant The First American Corporation is hitting new heights in application availability.

PUT IT IN WRITING

Nothing makes your commitment to partnership clearer than signing your name on the dotted line. That's why service-level agreements (SLAs) are standard operating procedure for First American's IT organization. "They've got SLAs that they've agreed to with the internal business units, and they ask their vendors to come to the table with SLAs too," notes Rick Geis, the F5 account manager who supports First American. That way everyone at First American knows up-front exactly what they can count on their partners to deliver.

You won't find them together in any thesaurus, but "partnership" and "reliability" might just as well be synonymous. After all, dependability is the truest test of a real business partner.

Just ask anyone at The First American Corporation, the largest online provider of business information in the United States. Around the globe, companies in the financial services and real estate industries, among others, rely on the Santa Ana, Calif.-based giant for everything from credit reports and mortgage trend data to fraud detection alerts and property valuation assessments.

First American is determined to remain a partner that its customers can count on long into the future. So determined, in fact, that the company has recently rebuilt its IT infrastructure from the ground up, migrating thousands of applications into two brand-new, state-of-the-art data centers. Today, more than 2,000 servers at those facilities are efficiently processing some 20 million transactions a day.

F5's BIG-IP Local Traffic Manager (LTM) plays a key role in keeping all that traffic flowing smoothly. But First American's relationship with F5 goes well beyond technology. Throughout the design and rollout of First American's next-generation delivery platform, the two companies collaborated closely to make the challenging project a success. As IT leaders at First American can attest, being a reliable partner to your customers is a lot easier when you have reliable strategic technology partners of your own.

Standardizing on a trendsetter

Though boosting availability was the main impetus behind First American's infrastructure rebuild, the company also saw an opportunity to simplify its IT environment by choosing standard infrastructure components. Local traffic management was a prime target for standardization, as First American was using technologies from three vendors, including F5. "Any time you need to have your IT folks tooled in three different platforms, it causes problems," observes Jake Seitz, First American's enterprise architect. For example, he notes, spreading technical skills across multiple technologies leaves you with a shallower pool of in-house experts to draw on when trouble strikes.

Working with Accuvant, an IT reseller and consulting firm based in Denver, First American studied its options carefully; ultimately, making BIG-IP LTM its corporate standard proved the obvious choice. "It clearly is the leader in the space," notes Brandon Drohan, an Accuvant territory manager who works with First American. Seitz agrees. "Based on our research, it really is the trendsetter," he says, adding that BIG-IP LTM also offers powerful features other vendors can't yet match, such as global SSL processing and centralized administration.

But functionality wasn't all that First American weighed before placing its local traffic management bets. It also took a good hard look at F5 itself. "We select our technology partners carefully," notes Evan Jafa, the company's CTO. "We want to make sure we're associating ourselves with folks who think the

way we do.” To confirm that F5 was a vendor they could trust, Jafa and several colleagues journeyed to F5’s Seattle headquarters for several days of face-to-face meetings with product managers and top executives. Those discussions convinced the First American team that F5 had not only the right products, but the right attitude as well. “We found them to be a great company,” Jafa says.

Teamwork

F5 made retaining that trust a priority throughout the launch of First American’s new data centers. “We really took a team approach to this,” says Rick Geis, the account manager at F5 who supports First American. Fortunately, deploying First American’s 30 BIG-IP LTM devices proved a relatively straightforward process. “They had several people on the network team with prior F5 experience, so it wasn’t a painful retooling process for them,” Geis observes. Just the same, an F5 consultant spent several months on-site with First American’s IT team, supporting the migration to the new platforms. “We were there for the cutovers, making sure everything went perfectly,” says Larry Bosquez, a field sales rep in F5’s professional services organization.

F5 provided a full array of additional services as well, including training for First American’s front-line technicians and ongoing technical assistance via F5’s Premium Plus support offering. Premium Plus customers enjoy 24/7 access to a dedicated team of certified support engineers thoroughly familiar with their infrastructure. F5 and First American personnel also meet weekly by phone to discuss pending issues, and gather in person quarterly for a more detailed review of past accomplishments and future needs. “Sitting down with F5 and having that regular dialogue has been very beneficial,” notes Karen Cunningham, First American’s vice president of network infrastructure and problem management.

The sophisticated feature set of BIG-IP LTM has benefited First American too. For example, the company makes extensive use of iRules, a scripting language that helps organizations customize their BIG-IP LTM deployments. At First American, one such customization helps mask sensitive data as it leaves First American with the intent of protecting customers against identity theft. “That’s the type of functionality that wasn’t available to them in the other technologies they considered,” Geis observes.

The BIG-IP LTM role-based access controls further ensure tight security by en-

abling First American to give its technicians only the permissions they need to do their jobs. “For example, the server administrators just need the ability to move servers in and out of the [server] pool,” notes Cunningham. Using fine-tuned access settings in BIG-IP LTM, First American can equip its server techs to perform that task, yet bar them from reconfiguring the network in ways that compromise safety.

Best of all, BIG-IP LTM is helping First American not only meet but actually exceed demanding uptime targets. “It’s had a significant impact on availability,” Jafa says. And responsiveness is up too, adds Seitz. “The performance we’ve gotten from BIG-IP LTM has been superior to what we got from the products we used before,” he says, adding that BIG-IP LTM scales more smoothly as well.

“The headroom for growth in terms of performance is much higher now,” Seitz observes.

Staying along for the ride

Not surprisingly, First American plans to expand its use of F5 technologies. “One of the things they liked about the F5 platform is that it’s

very modular, so they can add functionality easily,” Geis says. Already confirmed are plans to roll out F5 BIG-IP Global Traffic Manager (GTM), which will help First American dynamically steer incoming requests to whichever of its two data centers has more server capacity available. In addition, the company has its eye on F5 BIG-IP WebAccelerator module,

which speeds up web-based applications, and is also looking to expand its use of F5’s FirePass SSL VPN remote access solution.

The advanced features in such products are likely to influence First American’s decision-making process. But as before, it is F5’s dedication that will ultimately seal the deal. “It’s very, very important to us to have the right technology partner along for the ride,” Jafa says. “F5 has been there with us and stayed with us all the way through. That’s how we gauge whether we have the right partners or not.”

Rich Freeman is a Seattle-based freelance writer who covers business and technology.



From left: Jake Seitz, enterprise architect, Karen Cunningham, vice president of network infrastructure and problem management, and CTO Evan Jafa, all of The First American Corporation

Additional resources

The First American Corporation’s home page: www.firstam.com

Accuvant home page: www.accuvant.com

Information about F5’s Premium Plus support offering: www.f5.com/pdf/customer-support/premium-support.pdf