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Jake Seitz, Enterprise Architect, The First American Corporation

First American Improves Application Performance and Mobility with F5 and VMware

The **First American Corporation**, a Fortune 500 company based in Santa Ana, California, supplies businesses and consumers with online information in five primary industry segments, including title insurance and services, specialty insurance, and data and analytics. A \$6.2 billion company comprising 200 business units, First American is the country’s largest such information provider. Traditionally, each business unit had its own IT shop. But recently, First American created a cohesive IT operation capable of providing a standard services catalog, service level agreements (SLAs), and disaster recovery guarantees for all business units. Now centralized using F5 Application Delivery Networking solutions and a highly virtualized server infrastructure with VMware, IT is far more nimble, efficient, and cost-effective in meeting business needs than it was previously.

Business Challenge

While First American’s decentralized IT model had served the company well for years, as the operation expanded to include 19 data centers and five private networks, that approach turned problematic. When business unit managers wanted to launch new applications, they often weren’t sure who in IT did what, and from where, according to Jake Seitz, Enterprise Architect for First American.

Business suffered as a result. “The confusion would delay getting products to market, which would mean lost revenue,” Seitz said.

What’s more, Seitz added, the disparate approach to IT made offering SLAs, a common best practice for many enterprises today, nearly impossible.

First American realized that achieving the agility mandated by today’s business operations meant reinventing IT as a corporate service provider organization, operating from a single set of data centers, and offering common services and SLAs for all business units. The biggest hurdle IT would face as it consolidated operations and built up the new infrastructure would

Overview

Industry

Online information services

Challenges

- Centralize and standardize data center operations
- Optimize server processing in a large virtual infrastructure
- Improve application performance
- Support a growing number of diverse mobile devices

Solution

- BIG-IP Local Traffic Manager
- BIG-IP Global Traffic Manager
- FirePass SSL VPN

Benefits

- Streamlined IT operations
- Improved application performance and user experience
- Agility to support mobility and other corporate initiatives
- Improved scalability

Partner

VMware



be doing so without impeding any business unit. “We could not make a service so specific that if somebody else came along we couldn’t provide it to them. That would be a bad, bad thing,” Seitz said

Solution

Building a network infrastructure in support of First American’s common services mandate made Application Delivery Networking supremely important. Many business units already were using a variety of products, including F5 BIG-IP® Local Traffic Manager™ (LTM), for that purpose. But standardizing on a single product line would allow the company to simplify its environment while gaining the agility it needed as a services organization.

With an eye on flexibility, First American compared application delivery products from four major vendors. “F5 took the cake,” Seitz said.

Today, First American’s content delivery network comprises 24 BIG-IP LTM devices, configured in pairs for fault tolerance, shepherding application traffic to and from the two corporate data centers—one in California and the other in Texas. It relies heavily on caching and compression to offload processing from its highly virtualized server infrastructure, which includes 5,000 virtual machines from F5 partner VMware. Four BIG-IP® Global Traffic Manager™ (GTM) devices provide load balancing and disaster recovery between the two sites.

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Also missing from competitive offerings was the easy-to-use, customizable rules engine provided with the F5 solution, as well as the active development community surrounding it. First American engineers visit the DevCentral community almost daily, Seitz said, as they use F5 iRules™ to tweak the Application Delivery Network to suit First American’s particular needs.

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“We’ve done some innovative redirects with iRules and DevCentral that we didn’t have the option of doing before, and that puts us in a good spot,” Seitz said. For example, First American might redirect requests based on the type of web browser or mobile device in use or application being accessed.

Besides using the BIG-IP LTM and BIG-IP GTM products, First American is testing F5 FirePass® SSL VPN. It is doing so in anticipation of providing remote users with browser-based access to corporate applications, Seitz said.

Benefit

First American has successfully aligned IT with business needs. No longer are business unit managers scrambling to figure out the who, what, and where of IT. Instead, they go directly to central IT and select the best option for their needs from a catalog featuring 135 options, including application management and local and geographic load balancing. The F5 solution enables IT to guarantee service levels, assure disaster recovery, and easily support new business initiatives.

Improved user experience

Since re-architecting its IT infrastructure, First American has seen marked application performance improvements. Seitz attributes these directly to BIG-IP LTM.

He cites one example in which prior to implementing BIG-IP LTM, it took users an average of one minute to log into a critical web services-based analytics application.

“We moved this same application behind F5 BIG-IP LTM, and users are able to log in within 27 seconds. That is purely relative to the way BIG-IP LTM interacts with the web browser and the science it uses to speed performance up a bit,” Seitz said. “The user experience has improved twofold.”

First American further improves the user experience by balancing loads between the two data centers using BIG-IP GTM. In the case of one recent unplanned outage, for example, traffic seamlessly moved from one data center to the other without a service interruption. “We redirect folks and within minutes, we inherently get disaster recovery out of this,” Seitz said.

A pillar for enterprise mobility

The F5 solution also is proving invaluable as First American embraces mobility. “BIG-IP LTM has been critical in providing the experience that our consumers want on a mobile device,” Seitz said.

Through F5’s customizable iRules, First American has devised a way to optimize application delivery for each mobile device in use, be it a laptop, smartphone or other type of handheld. “We redirect the user, manipulating the services through the load balancer before the application ever gets delivered to the device. iRules are working really, really well for us,” Seitz said.

For First American, establishing a workable mobility solution isn’t just a nice-to-have, but is critical as the company looks out to tomorrow’s information consumers.

“Their preferred computing platform isn’t a desktop, or even a laptop; it’s the phone they have in their pockets,” Seitz said. “But rewriting 600 applications is impractical, so our thought was to let the network figure it out. A common point in your infrastructure, like BIG-IP LTM, is a perfect spot to do that. You have visibility into every application, and you can make intelligent decisions based on which device is trying to connect to it.”

Streamlined operations

The F5 solution also has proved a boon for IT operations in general, Seitz said. For example, IT is benefitting from the single interface and management console used across the F5 BIG-IP LTM, BIG-IP GTM, and FirePass lines.

“We can essentially train engineers once and they can support those three different types of technologies. That right there is a huge win because, as you can imagine, retooling an engineering staff so it can support the things you want to roll out takes quite a bit of resources—and we didn’t have to do that,” he said.

Fronting its massive virtual infrastructure with the BIG-IP solutions and using caching, compression, and other such functions to minimize server workloads also has enabled First American to optimize its operation. “We probably bought ourselves about 20 percent headroom in our environment,” Seitz said.

Over time, First American expects even bigger benefit in more tightly integrating the F5 infrastructure with its VMware servers. “When we start integrating the two technologies,” Seitz said, “that really is going to enable us to start thinking about things like cloud computing, self-service provisioning, and so on.”

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