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Chris Sherwood
Network Operations Manager

Beyond The Simple “Light Switch”: Why North America’s Leading MLS Provider Replaced NetScaler with F5 for Better Optimization, Control and Lower TCO

Industry:

Software (Real Estate)

Challenges:

- Increase in traffic
- Needed continuous, uninterrupted access to data
- Required targeted compression capability

Benefits:

- Provides granular control over Compression to reduce bandwidth consumption
- Delivers lower TCO with better support at a lower cost than the previous traffic management solution
- Provides a more intelligent, flexible and faster solution for 200,000 real estate agents nationwide



Overview

As one of the largest Internet-based MLS (Multiple Listing Service) providers in North America, Rapattoni Corporation required fast, consistent client access to their applications and data, from any locale, using any system. Rapattoni replaced their current traffic management device with F5’s BIG-IP Application Traffic Management solution, citing better end-user performance, increased scalability, lower TCO, granular control over traffic Compression, and a mature and intuitive user interface.

Challenge

Rapattoni Corporation is a well-established software provider to the real estate industry. Founded in 1970, the company has installed its flagship association management software at more than 200 real estate associations nationwide – customers that represent over 80% of the membership of the National Association of Realtors®. In 1999 the Company launched Rapattoni MLS, which has become the leading Internet-based multiple listing software on the market based on contract wins, number of successful installations, and independent customer-satisfaction surveys. Rapattoni’s rapidly growing user base of nearly 200,000 real estate agents nationwide requires efficient access to their MLS databases and

the many advanced features of the application, including list searches, reports, statistical analyses, contact management, auto-prospecting, sophisticated mapping technologies, and more – all of which must be consistently available and performing flawlessly 24/7, regardless of traffic loads or spikes.

Accordingly, along with growing number of installations came an increase in traffic – and the Company’s previous traffic management device became a 100Mbps bottleneck. The Company knew that a change was needed in order to prevent traffic jams, poor application performance, and long waits for real estate agents across the country that needed immediate, uninterrupted access to the data that helped them run their business.

Rapattoni currently has three DS3 lines going out to the Internet, where they push anywhere from 75 to 110 megabits of traffic throughout any given day. They knew that they would also soon be upgrading to an OC3, for a maximum capacity of 300+ megabits of traffic.

“We needed to upgrade to gigabit, and we realized our current solution wouldn’t be able to support that,” said Chris Sherwood, Network Operations Manager for Rapattoni.



The Company's previous solution wasn't able to apply and adjust compression based on the client, connection type and performance. This is important because compression is not a "one-size-fits-all" technology. Compression that lacks intelligence and granular control (i.e. when to compress and when not to) can actually hurt end user performance, especially for those clients accessing an application via a broadband connection with low latency.

"The challenge here is that optimization technologies are only useful if you can target them accurately," said Mr. Sherwood. "With our previous solution, we couldn't keep the compression functionality from hurting the performance of our high-speed user base."

Rapattoni required a much more intelligent, flexible and faster solution. Based on these and other factors, they replaced their current solution with the BIG-IP Application Traffic Manager, from F5.

Solution

The BIG-IP is positioned within the data center in front of Rapattoni's application and data servers – a locale where F5 has been successfully delivering application traffic for nearly 10 years and 10,000 customers worldwide. The BIG-IP device is unique in its ability to not only optimize but target various technologies for each application and connecting client. This provides complete control over payload content and the ability to best manipulate it to fit various business needs.

This was clearly exemplified in the product's Intelligent Compression capability which compresses HTTP traffic to reduce bandwidth consumption, lower TCO, and speed end user download times over slower/low bandwidth connections.

"A lot of Realtors out there are still running Windows 98 on a dial-up modem to access the MLS," stated Sherwood. "Others are technically savvy, with a fast computer and a fast Internet connection. We needed to be able to pinpoint both types of users and ensure that everyone had the fastest performance possible, regardless of connection speed or equipment."

Only the BIG-IP device could offer Rapattoni the type of granular control they required. "With BIGIP, we could not only turn compression on or off per virtual server, but could actually create rules (F5's iRules capability) that gave us the metrics to specify how and when traffic was compressed, based on user type, to give optimum performance for any type of user or connection, at the lowest possible cost."

"Our previous solution, NetScaler, was just like a light switch in terms of Compression – turn it on, or turn it off," Sherwood added. "We didn't have any granular control for specific types of users, and that was hurting client performance."

Sherwood cited another benefit of the granular Compression control found only on the BIG-IP system.

"It's not only the end user experience that improves (using Compression)," he said. "It also gives us a competitive advantage if our site surfs faster than our competitors' sites, especially during an initial demonstration to potential customers. It shows how well our site is performing. We haven't had a single complaint about speed or site performance since we brought in BIG-IP."

In terms of actual product cost, Sherwood warned that competing solutions may appear to be cheaper to buy initially. That theory was quickly negated when servicing and maintenance cost were added in.

"When you factor in maintenance contracts over 3 years, BIG-IP actually costs quite a bit less," he said. "That was another reason why we decided to go with F5."

Finally, for a company like Rapattoni, with a responsibility for about 90 sites and making sure they are performing optimally all of the time, the support of the company behind the traffic management product is nearly as important as the technology itself – and Sherwood was duly impressed with F5.

"The technical support you receive when you call F5 is absolutely second to none. I think it's amazing," he said.

The net result was a better product, at a better price, with better support that translates into the best business value available in the market today.

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