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George Pagaremos, IT Manager at Greek Yellow Pages

Greek Yellow Pages Improves Website Performance and Security with One Time-Saving F5 Product

Every year, millions of people turn to **Greek Yellow Pages** to look up information, and they expect to find answers almost instantly. The company consequently has to ensure that its website provides exceptionally fast performance. At the same time, Greek Yellow Pages must also protect its valuable online database from web scraping attacks.

A single product from F5 provided the solution to both these business challenges. F5 BIG-IP Local Traffic Manager Application Delivery Controllers improve customer experience by significantly accelerating page loading times, and they protect the site from web scraping attacks. In addition, the solution cut IT management and administration time by 60 percent.

Business Challenges

Greek Yellow Pages aims to provide the most complete and reliable source of information on products and services in Greece. As well as producing printed directories and delivering telephone information services, the company makes its data accessible on a website. People can access this site 24 hours a day, 365 days a year, to obtain information on everything from plumbers and florists to party entertainers.

Greek Yellow Pages had two very specific challenges relating to its online services. First, the organisation was experiencing

difficulties with the devices used to balance user traffic across its 30 web servers. Its existing Cisco load balancing products were not delivering the application speed that users expected, and Greek Yellow Pages feared that they would not be able to cope with an increase in user numbers. As the company was predicting strong future growth, the IT department needed to deploy more robust load balancing products, capable of accelerating its web application and serving many more simultaneous users.

Overview

Industry

Online information provider

Challenges

- Deliver fast web app performance for millions of users per year
- Protect the site from web scraping attacks

Solution

- BIG-IP® Local Traffic Manager™

Benefits

- Increases web application speed by 70%
- Improves protection against web scraping
- Reduces IT administration time by 60%

Partner

Pylones

Second, Greek Yellow Pages was becoming increasingly concerned about web scraping, a practice in which computers are programmed to systematically download large amounts of online data. Web scraping attacks can lead to the loss of vast amounts of business assets. In addition, this form of attack also absorbs bandwidth, leading to degradation in service for legitimate users. The company used an open source software product to help it monitor for potential web scraping incidents, but this solution didn't give it the strong point of control that it needed.

Solution

When the IT department started to investigate solutions to these two separate business issues, it discovered that F5 could solve both problems—with a single product.

The company considered a number of solutions from other vendors, but nothing else could match the performance and versatility of F5 BIG-IP Local Traffic Manager (LTM) Application Delivery Controllers. "Cisco products were very good for network load balancing but not for the web scraping; they didn't meet both our requirements," says George Pagaremos, IT Manager at Greek Yellow Pages. "The F5 products were straightforward to install and everything worked from day one."

Two BIG-IP LTM 3900 devices were implemented in an active/passive configuration at the company's main data centre by Pylones, an F5 Gold Partner. Pylones started by documenting the company's requirements and developed a full proof of concept in its labs. It then fine-tuned the products to meet the company's precise requirements, and the products went live two months later.

Pylones used F5's flexible programming language iRules® to define how the user

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traffic should be directed from the Internet to the company's 30 web servers. It then used iRules to set up a number of different procedures to detect and prevent web scraping.

For example, an iRule counts the number of requests received from a single IP address and automatically instigates blocks on these addresses when a certain threshold is reached. BIG-IP LTM generates reports on all addresses blocked, to give Greek Yellow Pages a convenient, central mechanism for managing its defenses.

Pylones also took advantage of the F5 iControl® application programming interface (API) to integrate BIG-IP LTM with a log analysing solution employed by Greek Yellow Pages. This integration, together with the use of iRules, enables the company to detect sequential searches (such as requests for information beginning with A, then B, then C, and so forth), which are likely to be made by illegitimate users. Such activity can then be logged and blocked.

"The F5 solution deployed at Yellow Pages is unique in the Greek market," says George Linardakis, Sales Manager at Pylones. "To our knowledge, this is the first time that F5 iRules and iControl have been used in such an innovative way to enhance the security of a large online database."

Benefits

Greek Yellow Pages now has a robust and reliable solution in place to balance its online user traffic. Through the use of compression techniques and by optimising the use of bandwidth, the BIG-IP LTM devices have significantly improved application speed. Previously, it used to take around 3.8 seconds for the company's home page to load. This has been reduced to less than 1.2 seconds. Similarly, the time required to present individual search results has dropped from 6.2 seconds to 2.2 seconds, substantially improving the customer experience. This represents an overall improvement in web application speed of 70 percent.

By replacing two products with one, Greek Yellow Pages has been able to reduce complexity in the IT department and minimise the amount of time spent on product administration. "I believe that we have reduced the time required to manage and administer our IT solutions by 60 percent," says Pagaremos. "This gives us the time to deliver more products and services that add value to our business."

The company now has considerably more sophisticated tools for detecting and preventing web scraping. These tools give Pagaremos greater peace of mind. He says, "The best thing about BIG-IP LTM is, for the last year, we haven't had to worry about implementing and managing systems for web scraping. BIG-IP LTM does exactly that we need it to do."

Looking forwards, Greek Yellow Pages is satisfied that the F5 solution will be scalable enough to meet the needs of growing numbers of users. Already, the product supports over 60,000 users every day and delivers 170,000 page views per day. It is with complete confidence that Pagaremos says, "I highly recommend F5."

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