

California Polytechnic State University

Winning the War Against Viruses and Spam

“WE DROP MORE VIRUSES AND SPAM AT THE EDGE, BEFORE THEY GET TO THE MAIL SERVER, WHICH REDUCES OVERALL TRAFFIC. EMAILS DROPPED FROM 450,000 PER DAY TO 150,000 PER DAY WITH MAILHURDLE.”

Jason Holt, Network Analyst, Computer Services, Cal Poly

CASE STUDY | EDUCATION



CAL POLY

BUSINESS NEED

Reliable, effective solution to combat viruses and spam

SOLUTION

Mirapoint RazorGate email security appliances

BOTTOM LINE

RazorGate delivers high catch-rates and low false positives

Background

Cal Poly, located in San Louis Obispo, California, is a nationally ranked, four-year, comprehensive public university. The emphasis of the University is a “learn by doing” educational experience for its more than 18,000 students. With over 1100 faculty, 1200 staff, and a sizable number of alumni and retired (emeritus) staff, the University’s active email community totals 25,000 users. Email has become a lifeline for communication. Traffic actually increases when the school is not in session, as students sign up for classes online and faculty members send out notifications. Ensuring the efficient flow of messages has been a top priority for system administrators.

The Business Need

A couple of years ago, Cal Poly’s email users and administrators were beginning to feel the affects of email-borne viruses. “We had gotten hit with several large attacks,” says Jason Holt, associate vice president, Computer Services, at Cal Poly. “We had no centralized anti-virus solution, nothing to push out updates or automatically retrieve new definitions. Users installed whatever anti-virus software they wanted on their PCs. Some still had the original definitions from two years before. We had no way of knowing who did or not.”

Not long after viruses threatened to bring Cal Poly’s email service to its knees another problem surfaced. “Spam was becoming a huge problem, creating a large backlog of mail in users’ inboxes,” recalls Holt. With the dramatic increase in traffic, queues were increasingly difficult to manage. Administrators had to deal with growing user complaints. Spam was chewing up available storage and bandwidth.

The one-two punch of viruses and spam could not be ignored. A solution would have to be found: one that was highly reliable, economical, and simple to manage and maintain—one that would not require another technician to support.



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The Mirapoint Solution

In 2002, a team began investigating email gateway solutions that would intercept viruses before they could reach users' mailboxes. A number of vendors were invited to make presentations including Network Associates, Symantec, Trend Micro, Osis (now part of Blue Coat), and Mirapoint. "We were very adamant about finding an appliance solution," says Holt. "We did not want a vendor shipping us a box of software and saying, okay, good luck."

At the time, Symantec and Trend did not offer an appliance, and Network Associates was very expensive. That left Osis and Mirapoint, which were asked to provide demo systems for evaluation. After a trial period, Cal Poly selected Mirapoint based on reliability, ease of deployment, ease of use, and manageability. "What really sold us was that Mirapoint seemed to have more intelligence than the other appliances we looked at and a lot of flexibility," says Holt. "Add to that the ease of management and high catch-rates and Mirapoint was the clear winner."

The Mirapoint solution resolved Cal Poly's virus problem, but by the summer of 2003, another problem surfaced—spam. "It was starting to cause problems," says Holt. "We were getting a large backlog of mail in users' inboxes." As soon as the budget allowed (December 2003), the university added anti-spam capabilities for all 25,000 users. To deploy it they simply had to purchase spam licenses from Mirapoint and turn on the feature using the existing appliances. No new hardware was needed. "That helped a lot," says Holt. "Users could filter their emails on the subject line of messages we tagged as spam. They could individually determine whether to delete the message or place it in a separate folder. It was up to them."

Between December 2003 and May 2004, email traffic exploded from 300,000 messages per day to over 450,000, due almost entirely to increased spam. "The gateways could just barely keep up, but the backend mail server couldn't," says Holt. "By May we were experiencing up to one-hour delays in mail delivery throughout the day. It would just barely catch up at night, but would start all over again the next day."

Cal Poly once again turned to Mirapoint for the solution. In May 2004, the University enabled Mirapoint's MailHurdle™ technology, which addresses message traffic at the SMTP-layer first to block and drop unwanted SMTP connections right at the network edge. This approach dramatically reduces the bandwidth, storage, and IT administrator resources traditionally wasted on processing spam and virus threats.

The Bottom Line

Cal Poly's email users now have a system largely free of viruses and spam. According to Holt, "We are able to drop a significant amount of viruses and spam at the network edge, before they get to the mail server, which reduces overall traffic. Our total emails dropped from 450,000 the day before we enabled MailHurdle to 150,000 the day after."

For Holt and the people responsible for managing the system, the Mirapoint solution has meant peace of mind. "We used to post notices giving users the status of the email system. We don't have to do that anymore. It's become a non-issue. We no longer have to worry about the email system. We know it's going to work."

Mirapoint has clearly demonstrated its reliability. "The gateways have been incredibly reliable," says Holt. "We've had no problems with them, period." He goes on to add, "When we first implemented Mirapoint, we created a plan for how to roll back from Mirapoint if it failed. After the first year, that changed to how can we leverage Mirapoint if other email systems fail? Mirapoint has become the most reliable email equipment on campus."

About Mirapoint

Mirapoint® is the market leader in appliance-based solutions for secure message networks in enterprise, service provider, and education organizations, with more than 115 million mailboxes served and secured worldwide. Customers use Mirapoint appliances including the Message Server mail appliance and RazorGate mail security appliance to build the messaging infrastructure that intelligently serves, secures and manages email. Mirapoint is headquartered in Sunnyvale, California, with offices throughout North America, Europe and Asia. For more information on Mirapoint, visit its Website at www.mirapoint.com.

Configuration

- Two Mirapoint RazorGate RG400 Email Security Appliances