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Success at crunch time

E-mail bugs get swatted

Two small Louisville companies shine in wake of Sobig attacks

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When e-mail attacks shut down computer systems nationwide last week, it was business as usual for two Louisville companies that eradicate some of the crud hitting in-boxes.

Network Advocates and IPOP.com are separate companies with similar pedigrees and products — services that scrub messages clean of viruses and eliminate most junk e-mail. And when crunch time came last week, both companies lived up to their promises, customers said.

"The Sobig virus that's recently plagued so many other organizations was not even a consideration for us," said John Rickerman, systems administrator for Interprint, a printing company in Clearwater, Fla., that uses Network Advocates services. "Never got a virus. Got a whole bunch of blocked viruses coming in," he said.

Sobig was everywhere on the Internet, but by using IPOP's service, "essentially, I never saw any of it," said Ray Clark, the systems and facilities manager from Business Information Solutions in Cincinnati. Any virus-laden e-mail addressed to the company was deleted before it reached his computers, he said. The IPOP.com service "is doing a magnificent job."

The two Louisville companies — both started in the 1990s and hatched from the University of Louisville's Information Technology Resource Center business incubator — are relatively small players in an e-mail-hosting field dominated by larger players such as Singlefin and Postini. "It's a pretty competitive field on a national level," said IPOP.com President Ron Reeves.

But "the big companies are not always the best ones to solve the problems in this area," said Jim Graham, director of the resource center. "Innovation wins. ... Sometimes smaller companies can move faster than the big companies."

Both Network Advocates, which calls its service VirusGard, and IPOP.com, with its Email Sifter, say business is booming.

VirusGard is used by about 400 companies nationwide, said Network Advocates President Tom Troutman. Email Sifter has a corporate list of about 100, mostly outside of Kentucky, Reeves said.



BY MICHAEL HAYMAN, THE COURIER-JOURNAL

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Network Advocates, with five employees, provides a range of computer networking services. IPOP.com, with a staff of nine, also designs and hosts Web pages. Both companies say the action now is in e-mail protection. "It's definitely been a hot market for the past four to six months," Reeves said.

A few months ago, more people were interested in stopping in-box-choking junk e-mail, Troutman said. After a flurry of e-mail attacks, the emphasis is on worms and germs.

Their services are similar in design. Before e-mail makes it to a company mailbox, it must pass through computers at the protection services, which perform a battery of tests. In a fraction of a second, spam is canned, while viruses and worms are neutralized. Safe mail passes on to the recipient almost instantly. "We just make it so simple, it's almost invisible," Troutman said.

The process is safer than antivirus software on the user's PC because the dangerous e-mail never enters the corporate customer's system, Troutman said. And his computers can spot e-mail troublemakers before software companies have issued the updates needed to detect and delete virus attacks. "Trying to do it at your end, well you just can't," he said. Anti-virus software is "too little, too late," he said.

"The beauty of this solution" for companies, Reeves said, "is there's nothing for them to buy or install."

The number of clients for Email Sifter has grown by 50 percent to 75 percent a month for the past four months, Reeves said. "We've reached critical mass with our customers," he said. "The game now is being able to leverage that by growing the business and keeping on top of the technology."

When Sobig hit, IPOP went from filtering out "a couple of hundred viruses a day to 8,000" at the peak of the infestation last week, Reeves said. Sobig was discovered Aug. 19.

Jeffersontown City Hall began routing its e-mail through Email Sifter about a month ago, said John Conaway, city information technology manger. So far, it has been well worth the price — \$350 a year for 25 mailboxes — Conaway said.

During the Sobig worm attacks last week, "we didn't have any problems whatsoever," he said. And there has been "a dramatic decrease" in junk e-mail. "Their filtering service works fantastic, especially for spam."

VirusGard, which costs about \$2 a month per mailbox, got a workout with Louisville-based SpectraCare Home Health, which has 400 e-mail accounts in 14 locations across six states.

"It was a nonevent. That was probably the nicest thing I had to tell Tom" after the Sobig attacks, said Jim Young, director of information technology for SpectraCare.

"I have not had a single virus to come through" since the company bought the VirusGard service this spring, Young said. And the program has gotten rid of all but a handful of the 300 junk e-mails he was receiving each day.

Both businesses performed well during the computer attacks, Graham said. "I'm extremely impressed by what they've done," he said. "None of their customers were affected. To me, that was the ultimate trial by fire."

While IPOP and Network Advocates are competitors, they rarely go head to head for the same customers, Reeves said. "We each have a healthy respect for each other."

"There's room for both," said Jim Clishem, head of XodiAx, a Louisville Internet data center that hosts some of Network Advocates operations.

Both companies also plan to remain rooted in Louisville.

"It's my home," said Troutman, 51. "And the business environment for us here is so positive and so encouraging, I can't imagine that I would get anything like that support" elsewhere.

Reeves, 36, is a Chicago native who moved to Louisville 12 years ago to work for General Electric and "got to love the city," he said. "This is home now."

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