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Does your company need the little blue box? - New Milwaukee products monitor Internet connections

special report: technology By Elizabeth Geldermann, of SBT

Internet reliability is both a concern and a top priority for more than just Web-based companies in southeastern Wisconsin. Internet downtime, whether the Internet service provider (ISP) or the hosting company is to blame, can inflict a hefty cost for businesses of all sizes in all industries. Internet downtime can temporarily stop online research, interrupt the transfer of important documents, prevent an e-commerce site from making sales or waste marketing dollars for companies advertising on the Web.

Both internal concerns for a reliable Internet connection and customer queries led two Milwaukee-based companies to create off-the-shelf products for businesses to automate the monitoring of their Internet connections. Oasis, a product of Onlight Inc., ensures Internet connectivity by allocating multiple Internet connections through one central appliance, which the company markets as the "little blue box." MonitorOne, created by Lightburn Inc., alerts a customer through e-mail or text message on a cell phone when a connection is lost. A downed Web site can leave a bad impression on a site visitor, said Holly Grey, vice president of sales and marketing for Onlight.

"A Web site is an electronic brochure for a company," Grey said. "It relays to a viewer the company's image." Every company needs an Internet connection of some sort, said Andrew Wintheiser, a partner in Lightburn. Chris Grove, chief investment officer for Fiduciary Management Inc., Milwaukee, said he decided to purchase Oasis from Onlight because if the Internet goes down at Fiduciary, information services are not delivered and scheduled file transfers, real-time data streams, changes in the investment industry and Web-conference calls are out of reach.

"The Internet did not go down very often before we installed Oasis, but the issue is the predictability and the impact," Grove said. "You can't predict when the Internet is going to go down and depending on the time of day or day of the week, Internet downtime can cause minimal or severe damage." Grove said he now has four Internet connections from four providers: two T1 connections, a DSL connection and a cable modem connection. Prior to installing Oasis, if the Internet went down, Fiduciary had a dial-up modem that was sluggish and took around 15 minutes to boot up, Grove said. "In the first two months of having Oasis, each of the T1 connections had gone down at least once for a period of time," Grove said. "We did not see any loss or degradation of a signal, and we were not aware of the loss of connectivity until the Internet service providers contacted us afterward to apologize."

Oasis offers customers a guaranteed Internet connection because of its multiple Internet connection ports. Clients can now subscribe to multiple service providers to save money, ensure connectivity and aggregate bandwidth to increase the upload and download speeds. By aggregating bandwidth, businesses that use Oasis will reduce operating expenses, said Betty Vollbrecht, president of Onlight. "Inexpensive connections come with inexpensive support," Nic Bernstein, vice president of operations for Onlight said. "Oasis allows people to take inexpensive connections and make them reliable."
A potential customer may use a single T1 connection that runs for $800 per month, Grey said. Business-class Road Runner High Speed Online from Time Warner Cable costs an estimated $250 per month, and a DSL connection costs $69 per month, Grey said. By canceling the T1 provider and aggregating DSL and Road Runner connections, a business is saving around $300 per month, she said.

"Before Oasis, if businesses wanted to multi-home (combine different Internet connections), they

would have to use border gateway protocol (BGP), which requires cooperation from each ISP and does not allow a mix of technology," Grey said. "With Oasis, businesses do not need cooperation between the multiple ISPs. If they want to add another service provider, they simply add it to the Oasis box. If they want to get rid of a connection from a service provider, they unplug it from the device."

The Oasis TC500 is a plug-and-play device, Grey said. The TC500 has two Internet connection ports, holds three megabytes of bandwidth and only handles outbound Internet traffic. The Oasis TC1000 looks exactly like the TC500 and has two connection ports and the same bandwidth availability, but handles both unlimited outbound and limited inbound Internet traffic, Grey said. The TC1000 is limited to one domain and one server. The Oasis TC2000 allows for unlimited inbound and outbound traffic, up to 12 Internet connections and offers 100 megabytes of bandwidth. The device is marketed by the company as "Internet reliability in a little blue box." If one ISP connection goes down, the Oasis box uses other connections to make up for the one that is not functioning. Users will not notice any difference aside from a possible slower download time depending on the size of the file, Grey said.

"The Oasis box makes the decision on its own without talking to other routers," Bernstein said. "Businesses don't talk to the upstream provider, and there is no interaction, other than paying the bill." Oasis sells at a one-time cost of between $5,000 and $12,000, depending upon the model.

Lightburn hosts servers and Web sites for multiple companies, Wintheiser said. Lightburn developed the software internally in 2003 to keep track of connectivity for its customers, so Lightburn could be notified first if something went down, rather than learning about the crash from a customer complaint. The Windows-based application can monitor any type of server, Wintheiser said, and can be set to check the status of the connection as often as the user wants.

"MonitorOne has helped us tremendously," Wintheiser said. "Instead of being reactive when a customer calls to say their server or their site is down, we can be proactive and can fix the problem before the customer even realizes there is one. MonitorOne has allowed us to have better relationships with our customers because they are not only contacting us with problems." MonitorOne is available from Lightburn for less than $100. The application can also be used to monitor a hosting company or an ISP and gauge how often the connection is down, said Andy Aschenbrener, business development manager for Lightburn.

Stamm Business Technologies, a Milwaukee-based IT company, uses monitorOne to monitor internal Web servers, client Web sites and applications running Stamm servers, said president Dave Stamm. "MonitorOne definitely worked for us because we are waiting to replace one of our servers, and rather than continually checking if it is working properly, we use MonitorOne to alert us if there is a problem," Stamm said. "We use MonitorOne on all of our servers so we can react quickly to better serve our customers." For whatever reason a company uses the Internet, businesses are increasingly reliant on the connection, especially to serve their customers. "There can always be trouble, and we are looking to be notified before we get a call from a client," Stamm said.

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