



Quickly Configured VPNs Facilitate Rapid Retail Expansion

A Case Study in Network Security

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BACKGROUND

An Ohio-based retailer of cellular phones and services, Flexicom operates stores under the Wireless name. The company has earned Verizon Wireless Premium Retailer status, expanded throughout Ohio, and established operations in states as far away as Florida and Nevada. Extensive plans for expansion into other states are currently under way. To prepare, they are standardizing store operations from a technology standpoint. That includes moving from an online to an in-house hosted POS system, and implementing a VoIP system to cut telephony costs and route customer calls among stores for more responsive service.

Flexicom's formula for success is built around supplying superior technology and ensuring customer satisfaction. They found the perfect partner in WatchGuard®.

CHALLENGE

According to Scott Rank, Director of IT for Flexicom, “We're looking to double by the end of next year. We want to put all our ducks in a row now, while we're still just a little over 50 stores. Let's say

an investor wants five stores — we want to develop a ‘store in a box’ from an IT perspective, where we can actually ship a whole store in one skid, ready to install.”

Reliability for Retail Operations

“We had a hodgepodge of devices in the stores, mostly Linksys and other small-office, home-office type things,” says Rank. “They were not really suited for a retail environment. When the stores were passing a lot of data through, they would just reset and wipe out all of the settings. Once or twice a month, one of those devices would drop off, causing us to drive out to the store to redo the config. In the meantime, the store was completely offline. It’s really hard to measure the dollars that we lost from customers getting frustrated and going elsewhere.”

Moreover, reliable, secure connectivity was a must for the internally hosted POS. It would require a secure, PCI-compliant, enterprise-class VPN for each store.

Capacity to Handle Voice Traffic

An even more important consideration was connectivity that could reliably handle voice calls. “Our plans are to put a PBX here in our corporate office and run voice-over-IP to all of the stores,” explains Rank. “We want all the calls to all the stores to ring into the corporate office. Then the corporate office will route the call to the store - unless the store happens to be closed, so we route the call to our telemarketing team.” The VoIP capability will not only cut telephony costs for traditional lines to each store, but also improve customer service by ensuring every call receives a live response.

WATCHGUARD® SOLUTION

When it came time to investigate store VPNs, Rank did due diligence, looking at products from Aventura, Sonicwall and other manufacturers. Cost was certainly a consideration, as Flexicom wanted to avoid paying a user fee for each VPN. As it turned out, one end of the ideal solution was already in place in the data center - a WatchGuard Core™ X550e, installed on a consultant’s recommendation, protecting Flexicom headquarters. Rank recalls how he “started digging around in the WatchGuard documentation, found the VPN feature, and saw how many users it supported. It was tremendous, right out of the box. And we could buy a block of VPNs for one flat rate.” So he settled on WatchGuard end-to-end and purchased more than 60 WatchGuard Edge X10e-W’s - enough to equip each store, and hold several units in reserve.

BENEFITS

WatchGuard not only met the requirements, but delivered a number of additional benefits as well. Some were expected. Others were pleasant surprises.

Configuration Time: Ten Minutes per Store

There are different kinds of connections among the various Wireless stores - everything from cable connections to T1 lines. But once the first few devices were installed, says Rank, “The WatchGuard appliances are so simple to set up that we’ve got it down to a science now. We connect them to our laptops, and plug in the PPOE information and static IPs for the connections that need them. We spend less than ten minutes on each.”

And the ongoing maintenance? “Every morning I get into the System Manager and take a look at device status and things like that, but really, it’s just something I do to get started in the morning. I can’t even measure the time, we spend so little on it.”

Delivering the Rated Performance – and Beyond

One of the biggest surprises was that Flexicom wasn't getting the full benefit of its Internet pipes. "We weren't fully utilizing our bandwidth and we didn't really realize it until we started putting the WatchGuard appliances in place. The old devices had this bottleneck between the computer and outside Internet. With WatchGuard, we plugged that same computer into the same Internet connection, and saw a significant difference in things like page loads on websites."

In fact, Rank had experienced similar performance problems with other equipment. He relates his encounter with a Sonicwall SSL VPN that he had tried in the data center. It repeatedly became unreachable and needed reboots. Then, says Rank, "We looked at the diagnostics. The CPU rate was in the high 90s and the memory usage was 70 percent or higher on the thing. That was with something like 35 users on a device that was supposed to be good for up to 50. They told me I needed to replace the hardware."

"That's one thing I really love about the WatchGuard. I've got the 550 now. If I want the 750, it's just a software upgrade. If I want the 1250, another software purchase. So I'm a couple upgrades away from having to replace the hardware. Honestly, looking at the capacity of a 1250, it's going to be a long time before we're going to outgrow that."

Standout Performance from the Company with 'The Bright Red Box'

WatchGuard has always stood out for Flexicom's IT Director. He recalls his first exposure: "At another company I used to work for, I had seen contractors come in with this red box. You're just not used to seeing a bright red box, it stands out in comparison to all the others. At the time, I asked one of my partners, 'What is that thing?' He told me, 'It's a Firebox®, you saw how he just brought it in here, plugged it in and walked out? The thing just works.'"

That has been Rank's experience as well. He has called on WatchGuard technical support a few times, most notably when he was setting up his first VPN and needed to bridge to an existing modem. "They really took the time to walk me through the process, and when their steps did not work, they took the time to remote into the devices. A lot of tech support people at other companies tend to get a little bit frustrated when they have to wait on information, but the WatchGuard people were very understanding – 'Give me a second, try this, try that.' They really took the time to get what I needed resolved. Things have worked flawlessly ever since."

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ABOUT WATCHGUARD

Since 1996, WatchGuard Technologies has been building award-winning network security solutions that combine firewall, VPN and security services to protect networks and the businesses they power. These fully extensible threat management (XTM) solutions feature reliable, all-in-one security, scaled and priced to meet the unique security needs of small businesses to medium sized enterprises. Our products are backed by 7000 partners and 450 employees representing WatchGuard in 120 countries. More than a half million signature red WatchGuard security appliances have already been deployed worldwide in industries including healthcare, education, and retail. WatchGuard is a privately owned company, headquartered in Seattle, Washington, with offices throughout North America, Europe, Asia Pacific, and Latin America.

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