

CITY OF SOUTH SAN FRANCISCO

CASE STUDY

INDUSTRY:
Government

WEBSense INTEGRATION:
Websense Email Security

"It's important for every company, and for every government office to demonstrate that they are trying to keep their work environment safe and clean. Websense helps."

Doug Hollis,
City of South San Francisco
IT Director



The City of South San Francisco: Balancing Public Service with the Need to Protect Employees

Overview

The San Francisco area witnessed the Gold Rush, the brothels and saloons of the Barbary Coast, the birth of the Beat Generation, the Summer of Love and the smoky haze of Haight-Ashbury, but city officials had never faced a dilemma like this. The growth of the Internet presented officials in the City of South San Francisco with the challenge of granting its 450 employees access to a world of digital content and email without exposing them to content that was causing a chorus of complaints. In early 2003, the government of this industrial and residential enclave just south of the famous City by the Bay were receiving complaints over the growing volume of unsolicited emails, including solicitations for Viagra or sexual come-ons complete with embedded pornographic pictures. The city's management team decided to attack the spam problem and protect employees from unwanted and unseemly content. For help, they turned to Websense for an email security solution that would eliminate unwanted email. After installation, Websense blocked the spam that comprised 30 percent of the 10,000 email messages sent each day to employees. Employee complaints have plummeted and productivity is on the rise.

The problem

The City of South San Francisco serves a population of about 60,552 people across 9.63 square miles. The site of South San Francisco was settled in 1890 for the establishment of stockyards and a market place for cattle. Other industries followed, including shipbuilding that began during the two World Wars. South San Francisco is the location of the San Francisco airport and over the last half-century, the population of South San Francisco has tripled.

As with most American cities, South San Francisco provides an assortment of public services—from police and fire protection to schools to transportation. During the dot-com boom, when Internet use became ubiquitous, city employees—like their counterparts in cities and other government entities across America—began to use the Internet and email as standard business tools. Police emailed crime photos to other departments for help in tracking down perpetrators. Citizens accessed information and city services online. Businesses found city contracts and placed bids electronically.

But South San Francisco officials quickly discovered the downside to the Digital Age. City workers helping citizens via email or communicating electronically with other government agencies sometimes found their email addresses posted online. This led to a flood of unsolicited email. And much of that spam turned out to be pornographic, including graphic pictures embedded in email that employees accidentally called up in the middle of a crowded, public office.

Doug Hollis, director of South San Francisco's information technology department, saw a spike in spam complaints in early 2003. "They would forward us emails and say, 'Can you stop this?'" Hollis recalled. Alarmed by the complaints, Hollis and his colleagues with the city also were aware that South San Francisco could be liable if it didn't take steps to protect employees from offensive material. They decided to test and purchase a sophisticated software content filtering program similar to the filtering technology the city already used to manage employee Internet access.

Hollis tested an assortment of email security programs, searching for a solution that filtered email and identified and blocked embedded pictures in attachments. Hollis wanted a product that would automate the process, require minimal staff time and work well. He also wanted a product that could be continually updated to fight the new techniques spammers devise every day. "The spammers are getting more sophisticated in their techniques to avoid filters," he said. "For example, they'll take a word like Viagra and change the 'i' to a numeral 1 to circumvent the filter."

The solution

South San Francisco tested Websense Email Security for 30 days and quickly decided that the product fit the bill. Hollis said his staff was impressed by the product's "digital fingerprint" technology of known spam, as well as the frequency with which the spam dictionary content was updated to block new spam. Websense Email Security's Image Recognition Module filters explicit images in the body or in attachments to email and can tell the difference between the tan image of a person or sand on a beach. Using Websense Email Security, South San Francisco has stopped the porn photo emails that were a particular nuisance.

Hollis was impressed with the ease of use and advanced functionality of Websense Email Security. And he was pleased with the Websense customer support team. He found it very useful to be able to customize filtering to block different categories of spam. "All city departments operate differently. The police department needs to communicate with other police departments to share confidential information and photos. At one point, the filter interfered with that email," he recalled. But with help from Websense, the city quickly set up different rules for email usage by police and other departments.

The results

In a setting like South San Francisco, information technology managers tread a fine line between protecting employees from offensive material and respecting their privacy. "We felt this product delivered the best of both worlds. We've succeeded in stopping the spam problem and avoided the label of Big Brother," Hollis said. Hollis says the filter blocks an average of 3,000 emails a day and more than 90 percent of those are spam—including porn. Of this number, Hollis estimates 300 emails are held for human review and then released or deleted—a process Hollis said takes about an hour of staff time per day. Meanwhile, city employees spend less time checking and deleting spam and more time serving citizens. "It's important for every company, and for every government office to demonstrate that they are trying to keep their work environment safe and clean," he said. "Websense (formerly SurfControl) helps."

About Websense

Websense, Inc. (NASDAQ: WBSN) is a worldwide leader in Web and email filtering, and a premier provider of Web security and desktop security products. Websense products are preferred by leading Fortune 500 and FTSE customers, as well as government agencies and educational institutions. Websense products increase employee Internet productivity and help secure organizations from emerging Internet threats by providing a proactive Web security component that compliments traditional security solutions. Only Websense delivers flexible, integrated policy enforcement at the internet gateway, network, desktop and remotely with over 24 million seats under subscription, ranging in size from 100-person firms to many of the world's largest corporations.

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