Packeteer, Microsoft Team Up on Branch-Office Box

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The all-in-one iShaper appliance offers WAN optimization and quality-of-service prioritization in a unified platform, Packeteer says.

Packeteer on May 7 added to the growing branch-office application-acceleration trend with a new all-in-one branch-office box, iShaper, designed to serve branches with at least 50 users.

"iShaper consolidates four to five classes of branch-office infrastructure. It can discover over 600 applications, do performance monitoring of each application, accelerate applications and limit malicious or recreational applications," said Alan Menezes, vice president of marketing at Packeteer, in Cupertino, Calif.

Through a partnership with Microsoft, Packeteer also integrated into the iShaper appliance such Microsoft services as an Active Directory domain controller, Systems Management Server software administration, and storage, print and security services through Microsoft's Windows Server 2003 and ISA (Internet Security and Acceleration) Server.

Existing Packeteer customers at Erickson Retirement Communities were happy to see the addition of the Microsoft functionality in the new iShaper, according to Scott Erickson, chief technology officer of Erickson, in Catonsville, Md.

"As a purely Microsoft-focused enterprise, I haven't seen anything that reduced the need for local domain, file and print services. My branches

require those. Now I can have one appliance that provides those local domain, file and print services in a very efficient approach," he said.

In addition to Packeteer's WAN optimization techniques, used to accelerate more mission-critical applications, Packeteer implemented QOS (quality of service) prioritization to allow enterprises to ensure that latency-sensitive or mission-critical applications get enough bandwidth even when the remote communications link is congested.

The iShaper's discovery mechanism can identify VOIP (voice over IP) as well as video-over-IP applications and apply QOS prioritization to those latency-sensitive applications. It can monitor the quality of voice calls and videoconferences, and identify and separate recreational video such as YouTube from business conferencing to apply optimization techniques appropriately.

Although the branch-in-a-box concept is not new, Packeteer and its partner Microsoft are taking it to another level, said Peter Christy, co-founder of Internet Research Group, in Los Altos, Calif. "There is no comparable Windows support on any of the - other - WAN acceleration products," he said.

Similarly, Packeteer's Menezes said, "Existing technologies are narrowly focused. They just do compression, caching, protocol acceleration and some branch services. But they don't address application services or the ability to provide stringent QOS with deep visibility into performance. This is what we bring, all in a single unified platform."

Still, the aim of most WAN optimization deployments is to eliminate servers from the branch office and consolidate those in the data center to better secure corporate data and reduce costs.

But, Christy said, the jury is still out on how best to do that. "How you

build the right architecture is still an open question, separate from the economic drive to do consolidation. The problem with branch servers is a cost of ownership problem - how to manage and secure them. If you can improve those things, consolidation wins. Microsoft is improving the cost-efficiency of owning branch-office servers," he said.

The appliance does eliminate a number of point products and different types of tools and services in the branch, said Mark Urban, director of product marketing at Packeteer.

"We can consolidate those point products for compelling total cost of ownership from a procurement and ongoing maintenance and administration perspective. And the operational cost savings allows our customers to create a new kind of application delivery architecture that still enables server consolidation, but opens the branch office to the successful delivery of a full spectrum of applications - not just file access but IP telephony, videoconferencing and putting in platforms that can adapt to new applications as they come out," he said.

After the first rollout of the iShaper, due later in the second quarter of 2007, Packeteer plans release a follow-on version that integrates additional Microsoft ISA Server technology, including firewall protection, VPN security and HTTPS (HTTP Secure) application acceleration, which is due in the fourth quarter.

Packeteer also intends to license other Microsoft protocols in widespread use in order to create advanced classification and acceleration technologies, the company said. Those new developments will be applied across Packeteer's product portfolio.

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