Managing and Monitoring Retail Data Networks and a Nationwide Telecoms Platform

BENEFITS

› 24x7 network monitoring of a 500 branch, nationwide network of retail outlets

› Real-time view of hardware and connectivity status across Marston's new telecoms network

› Marston's has a single view of its network with clear alerts on the status of devices

› IT can pinpoint, troubleshoot and resolve nearly all issues remotely, significantly reducing the need for and cost of engineer visits to branch locations

› Improved management of vendor SLAs because of uptime report data

› Ability to scale to meet plans to double the number of connected retail sites

> Marston's is the largest brewer of cask beer in Britain, yet there is far more to this leading producer of real ale than just barrels of its popular brews such as Pedigree and Old Empire. Behind the day-to-day operations of making beer lies a significant head office operation, 130 home workers and a large retail network of pubs, supermarkets and off licences. In addition to operating breweries at its headquarters in Wolverhampton, along with sites in Burton on Trent, Cockermouth, Hampshire and Oxfordshire, Marston's operates an estate of over 2,100 pubs across the UK.

Rethinking communications links with branch locations using WhatsUp Gold

A quarter of the pubs in the Marston's estate are operated directly by the company's Marston's Inns & Taverns, with the rest operated on a tenancy model. The company has been looking at ways to streamline its networking infrastructure, cut costs and deliver economy of scale benefits to its managed pub estate.

Marston's, along with most pub operators, is looking to enhance both its front of house and back-office infrastructure, improving communications and reliability of connection between the individual pubs and head office, while at the same time offering new services to an evolving clientele including public WiFi hotspots and internet-connected gaming products.

To achieve this, Marston's has taken the ambitious and innovative step of moving into the telecoms industry in its own right, allowing it to package and deploy its own customised services to various parts of the business.

"As a business, we have set up our own telecoms company. The reasons for doing this are clear for us – by taking advantage of telecoms unbundling we are able to significantly reduce the costs of telecoms and networking services for our own operations and offer cost-effective telecoms solutions to our managed pub estate," said Mike McMinn, director of IT for Marston's.

But creating its own broadband network and taking responsibility for the infrastructure going into its 500+ managed pubs meant that Marston's needed to invest in a scalable networking monitoring solution to provide visibility across the new telecoms network and to help identify problems with hardware and connectivity.

In its search for the right solution that would provide a reliable, clear and concise view of its telecoms infrastructure, the company turned to its trusted partner Level 8 Solutions for advice on the best network monitoring solution. Level 8 recommended WhatsUp Gold from Ipswitch.

"Having worked with WhatsUp Gold since version 8 and seen its development it is clearly not a product that languishes on its laurels and to that end we decided to become a reseller of WhatsUp Gold," Wilkes added.

As a business, Marston's already had experience of WhatsUp Gold, having used it within the head office environment for several years to manage around 100 key devices such as printers, networked storage and PCs. However, working with Level 8 Solutions, Marston's deployed a separate WhatsUp Gold installation to monitor routers and WiFi hotspots installed at its managed pubs, as well as to support home workers also served by Marston's Telecom.

"Using Ipswitch WhatsUp Gold, we are able to monitor the remote infrastructure installed at our estate of managed pubs across the country, ensuring that equipment is functioning correctly and that the connectivity we are providing through Marston's Telecom is also performing as expected. We are using a mixture of Cisco routers in the back office handing critical functions such as head office communications and Electronic Point of Sale (EPOS), along with DrayTek WiFi routers in the front of house for public WiFi and other connectivity requirements, so there is a significant amount of hardware that we need to manage and support from a central location," McMinn explained.

Marston's has also used products such as HP Insight to manage infrastructure, but found this regularly overloaded the IT team with alerts that were difficult to interpret and use in a timely fashion. In contrast, WhatsUp Gold provides clear and easy to follow feedback on the state of the network and the devices connected to it, offering users a single point of view over the health of the network being monitored and clear visual guidance when a device encounters a problem.

Economies of scale

By creating its own telecoms operator and maintaining a broadband head-end, Marston's is also able to offer more cost-effective network connectivity to its 500+ managed pubs, whilst controlling DSL contention, security, bandwidth allocation and traffic prioritisation. "The broadband connectivity we supply to our pubs is primarily for electronic point of sale (EPOS), public WiFi, gaming and telemetry, but we are already looking at the potential for Voice over IP in the future," McMinn said.

A useful by-product of creating Marston's Telecom is that the company is also able to provide its own managed broadband services to home workers, rather than incurring the full retail cost of a domestic DSL or cable modem contract for each remote worker. "In addition, we have around 130 home workers and staff home connections being served by Marston's Telecom. We make a saving by provisioning their connectivity via our own telecoms company and we can also manage their equipment through WhatsUp Gold," McMinn added.

Better networking and saving money

Marston's perceives savings of around £500,000 a year from operating Marston's Telecom instead of buying non-wholesale connections from other telecoms providers such as BT. There is even potential for further savings in the future as Marston's Telecom grows. Options include taking control of other parts of its infrastructure, such as its Multi-Protocol Label Switching (MPLS) network. MPLS is now the de-facto standard for many carrier and service provider networks, providing a mechanism for forwarding packets for any network protocol.

According to McMinn, moving Marston's into the telecoms business has not been without its obstacles, but overall has been a positive move for the business. "Moving into telecoms has been a challenge for us, particularly learning to work with other operators on a wholesale basis," he said.

Marston's hopes to expand the reach of its telecoms business to cover 1,000 pubs.

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> MIKE MCMINN
> Director of IT for Marston's

About Ipswitch, Inc.

Ipswitch helps solve complex IT problems with simple solutions. The company's software is trusted by millions of people worldwide to transfer files between systems, business partners and customers; and to monitor networks, applications and servers. Ipswitch was founded in 1991 and is based in Lexington, Massachusetts with offices throughout the U.S., Europe and Asia. For more information, visit www.ipswitch.com.

For a free trial please visit: www.ipswitch.com/free-trials/whatsupgold