

**Case study:  
Vistorm and Peoples Choice**

*The UK's fastest-growing online insurer needed an IT security solution that was 100 per cent watertight. And with hugely sensitive customer data on the line, there was only one chance to get it right...*

Peoples Choice offers customers across the UK the opportunity to purchase personal finance products 24 hours a day, direct by phone or via the Internet. Since its launch in December 1998, selling motor and home insurance, it has become the fastest-growing insurance operation in the UK, with busy call centres in both Manchester and Leicester.

The company has pledged itself to providing the highest levels of customer service, with 24:7:365 availability for all transactions, including quotes, policy adjustments and claims. Peoples Choice monitors the policies offered by a panel of well-known general and specialist insurers to ensure the most cost effective cover for its customers. It relies on the latest technology to deliver a fast, efficient service.

Since 1998, Peoples Choice has expanded from motor and home insurance into annual travel and pet insurance cover. Forward-thinking and future-smart, it is still one of only a handful of operators in the market that is geared up to transact business over the Internet.

Naturally, as an organisation processing thousands of transactions every day online, security is of absolutely core importance. To protect its vital information systems, Peoples Choice chose Vistorm to implement and manage the key elements of its security strategy.

**Customers come first**

Peoples Choice manages over 150,000 policies and handles thousands of online transactions every day. Its 400 staff are supported by an IT department of 19, which includes network manager Barry Wike. 'My responsibility is to ensure that we are able to support the sales, customer service and claims staff by providing a secure, stable and effective network,' he explains.

Wike. 'As an insurance broker, our customers details are the lifeblood of the company. If we were ever to lose this data through malicious or accidental damage, then Peoples Choice would find it difficult to continue in business.'



Nothing less than the survival of the company was at stake, in other words, and so an utterly solid and reliable security infrastructure was obviously required. Peoples Choice had to get it right first time. Looking at the marketplace, the selection criteria were clear. 'We were looking for best-of-breed, experience and knowledge,' recalls Wike. 'We wanted a fully managed solution, a service we could buy and forget about as much as possible, with no need to be worried or concerned about the day-to-day problems.'

Wike knew about Vistorm from an industry security seminar that he had attended. With a clear set of project objectives, he set about evaluating the alternatives. He found that Vistorm, with its strong market presence and reputation, compared very favourably. 'We were impressed by the price, the professionalism, and the all-round package,' Wike says.

**Smooth and painless**

In January 2001, Vistorm installed powerful Check Point firewalls at the Peoples Choice call centres in Leicester and Manchester, along with Websense, MAILsweeper and Sophos software. Vistorm also provided Internet connectivity and 24/7 monitoring and management

of the security infrastructure from their Security Operations Centre in Daresbury, Warrington. So began an initial two-year contract for the management of these applications.



Although the Peoples Choice network had never been subject to any known security threat, Wike and his department were well aware of the potential threats. 'Our networks and data were vulnerable to attack from external sources,' says



Simply put, a firewall provides a barrier between an organisation's internal information systems and data and the non-secure, external network of the Internet beyond. It constitutes a set of related programs, located at a network gateway server that protects the private network's resources from users from other networks. It does this by filtering all network packages and determining whether to forward them to their destination based on an organisation's electronic security policy.

In the case of Peoples Choice, Vistorm deployed the market-leading Firewall-1 technology from Check Point Software technologies. In addition, Websense software was installed to provide an access filter to prevent websites being accessed unnecessarily; MAILsweeper, to provide an additional defence against email-borne threats and Sophos to provide an additional first-line anti-virus protection..



'The whole installation was completed in under three days for both firewalls over two sites,' recalls Wike. 'This was carried out after a couple of planning meetings. In total, everything was completed about a month after the initial contract was signed.'

#### **An invisible blanket of security**

'In practice, the solution protects all aspects of the business,' continues Wike, who supports sales and quotes teams that spend increasing amounts of time doing business online. The products are largely used by remote access. All incoming and outgoing email is checked, and all Web content is viewed. Web content is also restricted as appropriate.

None of this operation is visible to Peoples Choice staff for at least 90 per cent of the time. Customers, of course, need never see any of what's happening but simply benefit from the tight blanket of security that the Vistorm solution provides. 'With the inevitable growth in the use of the Internet for the insurance market, Peoples Choice has invested heavily in ensuring we are at the forefront of the market,' says Tim Hudson,

IT Director. 'The fact that we are using best-of-breed solutions gives us the confidence to say to our customers that their information is safe in our hands.'

#### **Perfect partners**

In Vistorm, Peoples Choice believes it has not only found the right technology supplier but also the right business partner, one that has considerably reduced both internal workload and business costs. 'We definitely see Vistorm as a business partner rather than as a supplier,' agrees Wike.

'Vistorm participates in trials and provides regular account reviews. Generally we speak on a weekly basis, depending on what projects we have on and whether we need to implement any change requests. In addition we have six-monthly review meetings with our Vistorm service account manager when we can raise any issues and be informed of any new developments.'

#### **Better out than in**

Wike finds that the advantages of outsourcing have been substantial. 'To provide the same level of service internally, it is likely that we would have had to employ either a dedicated security specialist or an additional member of staff whilst existing staff were trained. Even if we were to have a dedicated member of staff, they would not have been able to provide the breadth of knowledge and experience that Vistorm offers.'

#### **One year on...**

So one year on, is Peoples Choice still satisfied that it has in Vistorm what it needed – 'a best-of-breed solution that we can forget about as much as possible'? Barry Wike is absolutely positive. 'We have not had to worry about the firewalls in any way, except to contact Vistorm when we are making a change,' he says.

'I would not hesitate to recommend Vistorm, and if I had to go back through the whole process, I would definitely use Vistorm again. They have been proven to be best-of-breed and offered us the exact service we were looking for. We would have the same confidence in them to supply what they have promised – and on time.'



#### **Looking ahead**

The ultimate proof of satisfaction is that Peoples Choice is keen to develop and deepen the relationship. 'We value Vistorm for their professionalism, expert advice and their wealth of experience,' says Wike. 'We are looking at a number of future products, including intrusion detection and penetration testing, which would enhance and improve still further the security we now have in place.'

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