



CNET Review – Mail Apps Go Head-to-Head

(2/6/01)

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A fact of life: E-mail is indispensable. Your business relies on it to communicate with colleagues, customers, and business partners. And what better way is there to keep in touch with our families and friends? E-mail has replaced the telephone as the number one communication medium. In fact, many businesses would rather lose phone service than the ability to send e-mail. A study conducted by Forrester Research estimates that 250 billion e-mail messages will be sent in the year 2002, an increase of about 100 percent in just five years.

With so many digital missives buzzing about the Internet, it's not surprising that users expect their e-mail services to be reliable and available at all times. Features that were once considered optional, such as browser-based mailbox access, are now mandatory, especially in corporate environments. Choosing the right mail server for your business is critical. Corporations need an easy-to-manage e-mail system, good support from the system vendor, and a system that offers a simple but clear disaster recovery plan.

We tested two e-mail servers: CommuniGate Pro 3.3 from Stalker Software and Sendmail Advanced Message Server. Both mail server packages were tested on a 500MHz Pentium III server with 256MB of RAM and 18GB of disk space, running Red Hat Linux 7.0.

CommuniGate Pro 3.3

CNET Rating:

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 **8** 9 10 best

CommuniGate Pro is a feature-rich Internet messaging server application. In addition to support for [SMTP](#), POP3 and IMAP4, it provides Web-based e-mail access, local and distributed [LDAP](#)-based account lookup, spam protection, SNMP support, automated mail-processing rules, and mailing lists. With support for static and dynamic clustering, CommuniGate Pro is extremely scalable, allowing ISPs and ASPs to expand their account bases simply by adding additional systems.

Installation

We evaluated CommuniGate Pro on a Red Hat 7 system, but it runs on any Linux distribution with a Linux kernel 2.0.34 or higher, as well as on a variety of Unix derivatives. We used the Red Hat Package Manager to install CommuniGate Pro from an RPM binary package—a simple and flawless process. In addition to an RPM file, Stalker Software also provides a zipped TAR file that contains an installation script that can be used to install CommuniGate Pro on distributions that don't support RPM packages.

Under Red Hat 7, the installer copies CommuniGate Pro into the `/usr/local/sbin` directory, and creates the `/etc/rc.d/init.d/CommuniGate` start-up script, which defines the location of the application base folder that holds the mail queues, domains, accounts, logs, and settings. For CommuniGate Pro to work properly, it is crucial to shut down and disable other SMTP and POP services running on the server.

Administration

You can configure CommuniGate Pro using a Web browser at port 8010. Its server administration pages are divided into four groups: server and module settings, account and domain administration, directory administration, and service monitoring. Each of these groups, also called realms, can be managed separately, so large sites can distribute administrative chores among several e-mail administrators. The Web-based configuration pages are intuitive, and the menu frame displayed on the left side provides a good overview of the large number of configuration options.

Each configuration Web page provides a link to a help page that describes the settings to be made on that particular page. Because the configuration pages are sufficiently detailed, we were able to configure CommuniGate Pro without having to delve into its well-written manual, which is available for download in Adobe Acrobat format. The only configuration hitch we ran into is CommuniGate Pro's requirement that users who have access to multiple realms have to reenter their username and password each time they switch to a new realm.

Server features

CommuniGate Pro's accounts, mailboxes, groups, mailing lists, and forwarders are created under the accounts realm. Existing mail accounts can be imported in the form of a tab-delimited text file. Once an e-mail account exists in CommuniGate Pro, mail administrators can impose restrictions such as mailbox size limitations, secure logins, and encrypted passwords. Mailing lists are an inherent part of CommuniGate Pro—not just an afterthought as with other mail servers.

CommuniGate Pro lets users access e-mail via POP3, IMAP4, and HTML. Its HTML-based e-mail access is adequate but it doesn't measure up to some other Web e-mail packages such as Microsoft Outlook Web Access (OWA). CommuniGate Pro also lets users retrieve account information via LDAP by either querying local account information or external LDAP servers.

CommuniGate Pro has very effective antispam capabilities. It accepts messages only if they have a valid return address and supports rejection of offending hosts based either on IP addresses or on hosts found in the [Realtime Blackhole List](#) (RBL). It also provides flexible mail-relaying options that allow routing only of legitimate messages.

CommuniGate Pro is a highly scalable mail server, able to handle a large number of accounts. CommuniGate Pro's cluster configuration allows a series of CommuniGate Pro servers to share the workload so that it can accommodate sites with more than 100,000 users.

The bottom line

Pricing for CommuniGate Pro starts at \$499 for 50 accounts and five mailing lists; prices can range up to several hundreds of thousands of dollars for large, clustered sites. A free version, which adds a one-line banner to every message, is also available for download from Stalker Software's Web site. CommuniGate Pro is a feature-rich messaging server that not only offers superior IMAP, POP3, and SMTP services, but also provides HTML-based e-mail access, excellent antispam capabilities, LDAP support, and a state-of-the-art list server.

Sendmail Advanced Message Server

CNET Rating:

1 2 3 4 5 **6** 7 8 9 10 best

Sendmail Advanced Message Server provides a platform for managing e-mail messages and mail delivery in single- and multiple-domain environments. In addition to the ubiquitous Sendmail MTA, which has become the preferred message transfer agent for most Unix derivatives and Linux distributions, Advanced Message Server includes a reliable message store with [POP](#) and [IMAP](#) access to user mailboxes.

Installation

Advanced Message Server runs on Red Hat Linux 6.1 or higher, as well as Solaris 2.6/2.7. To ensure a successful installation, you must uninstall other Sendmail products on the server, including the Sendmail MTA, which is part of any standard Linux configuration.

The Sendmail Advanced Message Server package is installed using the Red Hat Package Manager (RPM). Unlike most other RPM-based installations, Advanced Message Server requires that you run an additional installation utility, which collects system information such as the license key (the mail server's fully qualified host name and domain name) and the location of the e-mail log and database. The utility also creates the user and group accounts required by Advanced Message Server.

Installing Advanced Message Server is not a trivial job. The task would be much simpler if all installation-related tasks were part of the RPM package installer and configuration-related steps were part of the Web-based administration tool, instead of bundled into a separate, required installation utility.

Administration

Advanced Message Server's browser-based configuration is broken into four groups: User Preferences, Site Configuration, Domain Configuration, and Mail Routing Configuration. To access each of these areas, you need to provide a username or e-mail address and a password. The only area accessible to e-mail users is the User Preferences section, where users can change their passwords, set up e-mail forwarding, and manage out-of-office notifications.

The Site Configuration menu lets administrators manage site administrators and domains. Shared folders and users are maintained in the Domain Administration subsection. Shared folders are mailboxes that can be accessed by multiple users; a user may be granted read, write, or administrative access to a shared folder. User accounts can be configured to use either internal or external authentication, and administrators can impose mailbox quotas on user accounts.

Overall, Advanced Server's configuration could use more flexibility, especially when changing the characteristics of sites, domains, user accounts, and mailboxes. Although the configuration items are well organized, we ran into several problems while navigating through the various options. Pressing our browser's Back button often resulted in a Page Expired warning; this error page did not appear when we navigated via the provided hyperlinks.

Mail routing

While we were less than impressed with Advanced Server's Administration application, we were pleased with its mail routing configuration options. Sendmail is one of the most flexible message transfer agents on the market but also one of the most difficult to master. Advanced Message Server lets you configure the Sendmail MTA through its browser-based interface. After configuration, it transparently generates a `sendmail.mc` file, which can be viewed in a Web browser. The Deploy option generates a `sendmail.cf` file, which is used by the Sendmail MTA to route incoming and outgoing messages properly. Advanced Message Server also supports LDAP for both message routing and user authentication and can be integrated with existing LDAP-based provisioning systems.

Advanced features

Sendmail Advanced Message Server provides a powerful, scalable POP3 and IMAP4 e-mail architecture, but it doesn't allow browser-based access to user mailboxes and shared folders right out of the box. Instead, you must purchase the Sendmail Mobile Messaging Server add-on to get Web-based mail and wireless access protocol (WAP) support for wireless devices. Since Web-based e-mail has become so ubiquitous, we feel that browser-based e-mail access should be part of the Advanced Message Server package, as POP3 and IMAP4 are.

The bottom line

Sendmail Advanced Message Server's lack of built-in Web access is disappointing, and the package includes very few extras. Nonetheless, it offers a basic, scalable SMTP, POP3, and IMAP4 mail server for users who don't need functionality beyond SMTP, IMAP4, and LDAP. The entry-level Sendmail Advanced Message Server, which includes 500 POP/IMAP mailboxes, is priced at \$1,500. For more than 500 mailboxes, pricing is on a per-mailbox basis.

Conclusion

Comparing CommuniGate Pro 3.3 and Sendmail Advanced Message Server, the former is the more mature and complete mail package. Although we favor the Sendmail MTA used by Advanced Message Server, Sendmail needs to add more functionality such as out-of-the-box Web access and antispam functionality that doesn't require a Sendmail expert to configure. CommuniGate Pro's ample feature set, scalability, and support for a large number of platforms make it an attractive mail package for corporations, as well as ISPs and ASPs, and earns it our stamp of approval.