



FAX SERVERS

Revisited

How have fax server products matured in 2 years?



Faxing from the desktop saves time, and products that serve the needs of organizations of all sizes saturate the fax server market. Two years ago, *Windows NT Magazine* examined this market in a series of four reviews that discussed the features of 20 fax server products (see “Zen and the Art of Fax Servers,” December 1997; “The Fast Track on Fax Server Software,” January 1998; “So Many Faxes, So Little Time,” February 1998; and “The Fax Stops Here,” March 1998). In this article, I revisit the field to see how the market has matured.

Fax server products fall into the following categories: desktop (individual user), workgroup (small office), departmental (workgroup within a company), company, and enterprise (large multi-site company). A sixth category consists of specialized or niche products that don't fit into the preceding categories.

Because looking at fax servers in every category could easily consume several dedicated issues of this magazine, I cover enterprise-level fax servers. Enterprise fax servers comprise two broad subcategories: production and network fax servers. The difference is

in the fax server's purpose. Production fax servers integrate into your production environment—your accounts receivable system, for example—to perform an automated task such as faxing invoices to hundreds or even thousands of customers. Network fax servers can send faxes from desktop systems on a network and route inbound faxes to users' email inboxes, so users never need to leave their desks to send or receive faxes.

I looked for products that provide enterprise-level features such as centralized management, cost accounting, load balancing, integration with email systems, and, for software-only products, the ability to work with high-end fax boards such as Brooktrout Technology's TR114. Many of the products I look at also provide Least Cost Routing (LCR) and server load balancing and integrate with mission-critical applications such as SAP R/3 or PeopleSoft.

In any large environment, centralized management is important. In networks where servers might be hundreds or even thousands of miles apart, administrators can't always travel to the fax server to configure and maintain it. With a centralized management tool such

as a client management application, administrators can perform these administrative functions from their desks.

In large distributed computing environments, LCR can help reduce the cost of sending faxes. For example, if your offices in Los Angeles and New York connect with a dedicated network link and a user in New York needs to send faxes to clients in the Los Angeles area, you can reduce long-distance charges by forwarding the fax from New York for the Los Angeles server to send. LCR lets you configure two or more fax servers on your network to hand off fax traffic to another server when doing so makes sense.

Server load balancing lets an overloaded fax server hand off traffic to another fax server. Without server load balancing, if server A is overloaded, faxes might take many minutes or even hours to send, even though server B sits idle. Several implementations of load balancing exist, including a master/server configuration, rules-based configuration, and free-form, in which all fax servers on a network operate as one large fax cluster. I discuss unique load-balancing features in some of the individual product reviews.

TABLE 1: FaxFacts Features

PRODUCT	SERVER OSs SUPPORTED	CLIENT OSs SUPPORTED	WEB CLIENT AVAILABLE	EMAIL SYSTEMS SUPPORTED	INBOUND ROUTING OPTIONS	MAXIMUM LINES PER SERVER	FAX DEVICES SUPPORTED	FAX BROADCASTING AVAILABLE	FAX-ON-DEMAND AVAILABLE	COST ACCOUNTING MODULE	INTEGRATED NT SECURITY	TECHNICAL SUPPORT
FaxFacts	NT	NT, Win9x, Windows 3.1	Yes	Exchange, SMTP	DID, CSID, Rules-based, DTMF	72	Brooktrout, Gammalink, some Class 2	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	M-F 9:00 am to 5:00 pm Central time

FaxFacts

If you need a fax server product with fax broadcasting, fax-on-demand, and mail-merge capabilities, the FaxFacts server is ideal. FaxFacts has the features to create a comprehensive production fax server for your business.

Copia's automated installation program makes installation a breeze. The program walks you through three steps: creating the installation directory; using the FaxFacts Configurator, which Screen 1 shows, to select options to install; and performing the installation. After installation completes, the product is ready to use.

Copia's approach to centralized fax resource management is unique. Rather than using a client application to connect to the fax server and modify operational parameters, you use a series of configuration files on the server. To change the server's operation, you connect to the server and edit the appropri-

ate file. The benefit of this approach is that you can connect to the server from your laptop without any special client software—a real plus in a large corporate environment if you need to make a quick adjustment when you're away from your workstation.

The only difficulty with this approach is figuring out the command language. For example, I wanted to test sending faxes from my SCO UNIX host. With FaxFacts, you create a fax-to-send file that contains a series of commands that tell the server how to process the fax. The product includes documentation, but the reference manual is difficult to understand and doesn't provide examples of how to use the commands, so creating the command file took longer than I expected.

One FaxFacts feature I found useful is automatic server load balancing. Some of the other products require you to configure load balancing manually (e.g.,

define master and slave servers and tell the product how to perform load balancing when usage exceeds a certain threshold). With FaxFacts, you merely update the configuration files to include additional servers. The product treats all lines across all fax servers as one large fax server and automatically uses the first open line to send faxes, regardless of which server the line is attached to.

How many times have you had a long fax abort halfway through and had to start over at the beginning to send the fax? FaxFacts' Intelligent Retry feature eliminates that inconvenience and can save money if you routinely send faxes to locations with poor-quality phone lines. Intelligent retry lets you configure as many as eight retry strategies for the software to use to respond to a fax failure. For example, I created a default retry strategy that resends a failed fax's unsent pages.

FaxFacts' price is inexpensive, and the product's pricing structure is simple. A two-tiered pricing structure charges per line on the server and per client for each seat on the network. The Fax Mail component, which routes faxes to users' email inboxes, adds \$185 per line. ▲

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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FaxFacts

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<http://www.copia.com>

PRICE: \$550 per line and \$50 per client; Fax Mail component is \$185 per line

DECISION SUMMARY:

Pros: Convenient centralized management, fax load balancing, smart retry of incomplete faxes, good fax broadcasting, fax-on-demand, mail-merge capabilities, inexpensive

Cons: Poor documentation and difficult configuration command language



▲ SCREEN 1:

Configuring FaxFacts with the FaxFacts Configurator

COPIA

Contact sales at:
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www.copia.com