



It's ideal for us that MessageLabs Anti-Virus service is scanning every email, incoming and outbound, well away from our network. On one hand it would be extremely bad for us to be sending our customers or suppliers infected email. On the other, it's good to know that we can just open attachments without fear of nasty consequences.

Nick Turner
IT Development Manager
Cotton Traders

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Worries about email viruses are a thing of the past for Cotton Traders. With MessageLabs Anti-Virus service screening all its email at Internet level, this hugely successful leisure-wear manufacturer and retailer knows that all viruses will be stopped before they come anywhere near the company's internal systems.

Mail order and retail clothing company Cotton Traders was founded by two former rugby internationals, both of whom captained England during the early 1980s – Fran Cotton and Steve Smith. Based in Altrincham, Cheshire, Cotton Traders has grown to become a thriving business with an annual turnover of more than £30 million, endorsed by a partnership with Next plc and employing over 500 people around the UK.

Cotton Traders' mail order business now has nearly 800,000 customers on its database, and produces 27 different editions of its catalogue each year. While the bulk of the company's business comes from the mail order division, Cotton Traders also sells retail through a rapidly growing network of its own shops – currently numbering 25 – across Britain, and wholesale to other mail order and retail companies.

Dressed to kill

"Like many businesses, we've advanced over a very short time from having no email facility to an absolute dependence on it," says Nick Turner, IT development manager for Cotton Traders.

"Only three years ago we had no electronic messaging system at all. Now we've got an email address book with more than 60,000 customers listed, to say nothing of all our suppliers and staff."

As an international business, Cotton Traders' use of email has grown exponentially over the three years, becoming a standard means of communication with suppliers, customers, staff in the field and the company's growing network of retail outlets.

A need for complete email virus protection

Neither McAfee or Innoculator Anti-Virus software, posted at server and desktop level, spotted the arrival of Lovebug, since there was no signature available at the time of its release.

"Fortunately we received only one copy on one machine, which we disconnected immediately," says Nick. "Even so, it cost us four hours work, but the damage it could have caused us doesn't bear even thinking about. It was an early warning for us."

It was also the prompt for Nick and his team to investigate the good things they'd been hearing about MessageLabs. Soon afterwards Cotton Traders signed up to the anti-virus service and, at the time of writing, 123 potentially damaging viruses had already been intercepted before they could penetrate the company's systems.

Heading off the hazards of attachments

"Even though we'd had virus checking software internally from the early days, we were aware of the scale of the virus threat and that we were susceptible," says Nick. "Our stock is manufactured globally, and we're constantly exchanging email with suppliers, as well as buyers in the field. Inevitably that involves a large number of attachments carrying technical information, specifications, photographs of garment samples and so on."

In 2000, Cotton Traders also went online with an e-trading facility, generating a huge number of email orders and requests for catalogue information. Nick Turner estimates that there are times when the company sends out up to 12,000 emails in a day with new product information to customers.

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Protection for the back office functions

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There's also peace of mind for Nick's team in the protection the Anti-Virus service provides for the company's standard backing-up procedure, which is run each night. All transactions from purchase and despatch to telesales, mail order, retail and wholesale sales are gathered into the system.

"If a virus got in and brought the system down during the night – which it could easily do without MessageLabs scanning our mail round the clock – it would hit us very hard indeed," Nick says. "Every department would be brought down and it would mean the end of business for around a week. A complete disaster!"

Free to concentrate on building a VPN

A further benefit to Nick and his team is the additional time they now have to devote to more productive projects. As he says, they can embark on new developments without worries about the virus problem.

For example, one current project is aimed at creating a Cotton Traders VPN, to enable staff to access the company's systems from a home base. "Without the certainty of MessageLabs protection", says Nick, "that would be a far more complex task."

"No doubt about it, we've had fewer worries since we signed up with MessageLabs," he says. "We're very happy with the service. Sometimes it feels like there are no more dragons left to slay. MessageLabs does that for us!"