

FOX Sports Interactive Case Study

FOX Sports Shrinks Process of Sending Email from Two Days Down to Two Hours



"StrongMail enabled us to tightly integrate all of our systems, increase deliverability and gain access to key tracking data that we needed to optimize our programs."

Andrew Hossom, Vice President, Marketing
FOX Sports Interactive



FOXSPORTS.COM on msn

FOX Sports Interactive
a division of FOX Interactive Media
Beverly Hills, California
www.FOXsports.com

Industry
Media & Entertainment

Return on Investment
> Reduced weekly IT resource needs by 70%
> Lower projected annual email marketing costs of 60%
> Cut operational costs by 50%
> System integration accomplished within man weeks of work

Key Benefits
> Direct integration with custom content management system
> Built-in tracking system
> Automated bounce processing
> Compliance with AOL feedback loop

Products & Services
> StrongMail®
> StrongDelivery Tools

Integrated Business Assets
> Custom content management system
> Oracle® database

Driving Viewership

FOX Sports Interactive (FSI) develops new media initiatives for FOX Sports and FOX Sports Net. FSI distribution channels include Internet (msn.FOXsports.com), broadband, wireless and interactive television. FOXSports.com on MSN is a comprehensive and entertaining source of online sports news, information, listings, games and special features about programming on FOX Sports, FOX Sports Net, FOX Sports Radio and much more from the world of sports.

Each week, FOX Sports Interactive delivers millions of emails to their customers, providing them with time-sensitive sports news with one objective in mind: drive viewership. One such program, called "FOX Flash", contains time-relevant information about sporting news, events, scores, and most importantly, upcoming programming. The goal is to drive continued traffic to the website and, in turn, FOX Sports television programming, increasing viewership and ratings for FOX Sports.

A Challenging Environment

Prior to implementing StrongMail, FOX Sports had developed a home-grown email system (Fig. 1).

Content Management	Custom code
Bounce Handling	
Integration	
Deliverability Monitoring	None
Tracking	3rd party, web-hosted service
Delivery	Commercial MTA appliance
Database	Oracle

While the custom content management solution provided FOX Sports control over the creative assets—and the Oracle database provided all the customer data—the remainder of the solution failed to keep pace with FOX Sports' needs.

"We had a commercial MTA appliance in our system, but found it was good for only one thing—sending out lots of emails. It had no capabilities beyond that. No level

of useful business reporting. No capabilities to integrate with our content management system. And zero metrics on delivery."

FOX Sports relied on a considerable amount of custom code for bounce handling, integration with a tracking system, and integration with their content management system. As a result, a significant amount of effort was required, both short- and long-term, to keep the system up to date. The resulting system also required significant resources on an operational basis to send an email out to customers.

"To get an email out through the system required two days of work covering everything from advance scheduling with IT to manage the MTAs through finally loading the content into the system. This is not to mention the follow-on work to track and analyze the results."

FOX Sports needed to find an alternative solution that would not only simplify the operational processes of sending an email, but also provide them the delivery metrics they needed and eliminate the ongoing costs of keeping the system up to date.

Why StrongMail?

FOX Sports evaluated a number of commercial MTA and outsourced solutions with an eye to satisfying these five crucial business requirements, none of which were being addressed adequately with their existing email platform:

> Integrate business assets to automate deployment process.

With their original commercial MTA, FOX Sports was spending considerable time converting existing business data to the formats required by these email solutions. StrongMail offered FOX Sports a new alternative with an open, file system-based interface that distilled content integration down to a few simple steps; their IT department would no longer have to spend valuable time on what was otherwise a strictly marketing activity. For data integration, StrongMail offered FOX Sports the ability to seamlessly integrate their business data as-is, without the need for further time-consuming data conversion.

FOX Sports also evaluated a number of outsource solutions. Cost notwithstanding, FOX found that there would be challenges given the level of integration and accessibility they required in their environment. FOX wanted the platform

to be accessible from any desktop through their content management system and to accommodate a wide range of users in their organization. Outsourced solutions required more complex integration, making it difficult to provide the level of access FOX Sports needed.

> Increase email deliverability rates

FOX Sports was understandably concerned with making sure their customers received the mail they asked for. StrongMail offered FOX Sports a wide variety of configuration options to maximize deliverability, including per-domain throttling and connection limits, virtual IP technology, whitelisting, ISP feedback loops, and blacklist monitoring. By implementing a powerful combination of these features, StrongMail gave FOX Sports the opportunity to meet the ever-changing requirements of ISPs and corporate networks to which they were sending email, thus making sure their connections were not blocked.

> Maintain ISP/spam-filter compliance

Beyond simply satisfying the technical requirements of outside networks, StrongMail also offered FOX Sports the ability to tailor the content of their messages to ensure they were not filtered or bounced as spam by the ISPs. Many networks filter email content based on ever-changing, unpublished criteria. Fortunately, StrongMail offered FOX Sports the ability to audit their messages prior to launch, and avoid using content or characteristics that might have raised red flags for mail administrators at the ISPs or corporate networks. Finally, because uniform content is a common characteristic of spam, StrongMail offered FOX Sports future growth by providing a platform for sending customized, personalized messages to each of their customers individually.

SMTP is evolving, attempting to close the major loopholes which have allowed spammers and malicious senders to defraud unsuspecting recipients. New proposed standards—such as SenderID, SPF, DomainKeys, and DKIM—are emerging which will allow business senders to guarantee that email messages claiming to be from them did actually originate from them. StrongMail's in-house solution offered FOX Sports the ability to easily begin taking advantage of these new standards as needed to meet their delivery objectives.

"StrongMail was the only complete solution able to provide all the required components including collecting and managing data, and providing us the necessary bounce handling and spam-compliance. It also had the flexibility we needed to directly integrate with our existing systems."

Andrew Hossom, Vice President, Marketing
FOX Sports Interactive

> **Decrease IT overhead in email deployment**

Sending business email is, first and foremost, a business task. StrongMail uniquely offered FOX Sports the chance to relieve their IT department of having to spend valuable time operating the mail process by returning email deployment entirely to their marketing department. With its complete, end-to-end platform, StrongMail could automate the entire pipeline of the email process, ensuring comprehensive delivery execution and providing the marketing team visibility into the entire process. Now marketing has control over all phases of email deployment—from integration into their desktop and database, capturing deliverability metrics, and reviewing bounce and unsubscribe feedback—successfully delivering specific content to a targeted segment of their customer base.

> **Standardize on common platform**

Finally, only StrongMail offered FOX Sports the opportunity to satisfy all their business email requirements with a single, all-in-one solution. All other commercial MTA solutions would have required additional custom code and increased expenditure to address the evolving requirements of dynamic content and deliverability. StrongMail offered FOX Sports the best possible infrastructure and development tools for advanced electronic customer communications without excessive technical complexity or costly outsourcing.

As a result of the comprehensive evaluation process, FOX Sports Interactive chose StrongMail as the best solution to fully integrate their business systems with outbound email.

“Before our decision, we evaluated ASP solutions and commercial MTAs but we found them to be too inconvenient, inflexible, incomplete, or costly,” commented Hossom. “StrongMail was the only complete solution able to provide all the required components including collecting and managing data, and providing us the necessary bounce handling and spam-compliance. It also had the flexibility we needed to directly integrate with our existing systems.”

Finally, StrongMail was the most cost-effective alternative of all the solutions FOX Sports investigated, for two reasons. First, StrongMail includes most of the features FOX Sports needs in their email platform, which means

they will have to do very little customization. Second, by using StrongMail, FOX Sports will incur no ongoing per-message charges, as they would with an outsourced solution.

A Fully Integrated System with High Deliverability

FOX Sports has implemented StrongMail, an email app server that supports message assembly and personalization, full tracking capabilities, bounce handling, and compliance with industry best practices. The end result was a common, standardized platform that eliminated the ongoing need to update custom infrastructure code and decreased the amount of manual IT involvement.

“Within weeks, with little effort, we were able to integrate our website databases and content management system with the StrongMail platform, we now have an ‘Export to StrongMail’ button on our content management interface,” Hossom said.

StrongMail has also enabled FOX Sports to speed throttle mailings, limit domain connections, and comply with whitelists and the AOL feedback loop to ensure maximum delivery potential. FOX has also leveraged StrongDelivery Tools to monitor deliverability. “Each day’s delay in not rectifying deliverability or performance problems potentially impacts millions of subscribers,” adds Hossom. “StrongDelivery Tools helps us optimize our creative and track delivery to the Inbox, minimizing our deliverability problems.”

“The prospect we were facing was that the overall costs of our email programs were higher than we wanted. These were only going to increase if we were going to keep pace with our deliverability challenges. Overall, the implementation of the StrongMail system reduced our projected costs by over 60%.” This figure, predicts Hossom, will grow as other FOX Sports traffic increases and new email programs are developed using StrongMail. “Apart from improving our email systems, by using StrongMail as a fully-integrated foundation, we now have a platform in which we can very quickly grow new email initiatives,” Hossom notes.

Process Cut From Two Days To Two Hours

FOX Sports has slashed time spent handling custom “one-off” deployment needs—as well as 70% of their system resources—by integrating StrongMail into their existing systems.



About StrongMail Systems, Inc.

StrongMail Systems enables companies to realize the value of digital messaging, with high-performance servers that simplify and enhance outbound email systems.

StrongMail servers integrate a complete set of delivery, tracking and management capabilities into a single platform to “business-enable” email and other digital messages, allowing companies to build new revenue streams, improve customer loyalty and reduce costs. StrongMail servers integrate with existing business applications to unlock the potential of digital messaging for enterprises, service providers and ISV’s.

StrongMail is located in Redwood City, CA and is funded by Evercore Partners, Globespan Capital Partners and Sequoia Capital, the venture capitalists behind Google, Yahoo!, Cisco and Apple.

To learn more about StrongMail Systems, visit www.strongmail.com.

Contact StrongMail Systems today.

800-971-0380
info@strongmail.com

StrongMail Systems Inc.
1300 Island Drive, Suite 200
Redwood City, CA 94065
P 650-421-4200
F 650-421-4201

www.strongmail.com

SM-Q10406
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“Pushing out an email—say for a news flash or schedule update—requires nothing more than a content designer and marketing coordinator to get it done. Our designers only need to know the basic HTML skills to use the content management system and with the touch of a button can now load the system and send email to the targeted customers.”

Now the marketing group can respond immediately to FOX Sports’ business needs. “For example, suppose a NASCAR race is rained out. We need to immediately respond to draw a new audience to the changed schedule. We also now have greater flexibility responding to the local needs of regional markets by allowing marketing for upcoming special coverage or programming. The result is we can be more responsive to editorial and business needs in driving our number one goal: increasing viewership and ratings for FOX Sports.”

IT has constructed a standard set of queries to load the segmented customer data from Oracle. Bounce and unsubscribe data are returned to the customer database and the records are updated instantly. The result is a fully automated end-to-end process which enables the marketing department to plan, execute, and deliver messages based on real time objectives with no involvement from IT. Now IT only gets involved to support new initiatives that add value to the business.

Doubling Open Rates and Streamlining Processes

By improving deliverability, the StrongMail solution has doubled FOX Sports’ open rates. By closely analyzing their deliverability statistics, FOX Sports has ensured that more messages are getting through. Also, with accurate feedback loops in place, database hygiene has improved, which has further strengthened targeting and delivery. Finally, FOX Sports has noticed a

significant increase in consumer response rates, indicating that their recipients have widely embraced the new email system.

“StrongMail helped us to identify a number of logjams in the overall process,” says Hossom. “As a result I’ve ended up knowing more than I should or would have known about the Oracle database and other systems. But now, the fact is I don’t need to know and the fact that I don’t need to bother IT is a huge bonus.”

Bringing More Groups and More Mailings Online

The original system was targeted for use by multiple news divisions within FOX Sports. However, with the integration and ease of use, the StrongMail infrastructure is finding new uses within the company.

“Recently our PR group came to me, looking for a better solution and wanting to learn more about StrongMail. I was able to immediately help them. I created new templates in our content management system, connected it to their dataset, and now a PR person can create a news flash and send it out in under two minutes.” The resulting email is now FOX Sports branded and provides appropriate opt-out options. The feedback from StrongMail has also helped PR improve the quality of their email lists. “It’s easy and reliable for anyone in the organization to use.”

Future Plans

FOX Sports intends to launch new functionality and programs using StrongMail. The XML-based dynamic content engine in StrongMail Enterprise can provide additional leverage as FOX Sports looks to further personalize the content to the consumer, which will continually increase the timeliness, relevance and value of their messaging programs.

