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Virtual Security Essentials

Catbird Offers Virtual Security Solutions That Are As Indispensable As Firewalls



Virtualization security vendor Catbird has dealt with confusion over its name since its founding in 2000. “We always get asked, ‘What is a catbird?’” Catbird COO Edmundo

Costa says. Some think “catbird” is some sort of strained security metaphor about a cat catching a bird. Others imagine a bird with a cat’s head.

“I will often start a talk by saying, ‘A catbird is a bird that sits high in a tree canopy and alerts other birds to intruders,’” says Tamar Newberger, vice president of marketing at Catbird (www2.catbird.com). According to both executives, the metaphor that best describes what their company does is the idiom “catbird seat,” which suggests that users can relax because Catbird is doing the network equivalent of what its feathered namesake does in the forest—constantly monitoring the environment and alerting others of the presence of any threat.

Regardless of how you interpret the term, Catbird has been making a name for itself in the realm of virtualization security.

At this year’s VMworld Awards, two of its products, Catbird vCompliance and Catbird vSecurity Cloud Edition, won finalist awards in their respective categories—the first time any company has won two awards in a single year.

■ Always In The Cloud

Catbird has focused on network security in various iterations since its inception. “We had an interesting idea on how to do remote network security long before it became fashionable to talk about the cloud,” explains Newberger.

Initially, Catbird developed a strong portfolio in Web-based cloud security, where it specialized in monitoring organizations’ Web sites. Then Catbird migrated to tracking the inner workings of the data center. “That was a natural progression to us, focusing on monitoring virtualized data centers, because it takes sophisticated technology to see inside the virtual network in a way that’s

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- Catbird specializes in automated security for virtualized environments.
- Its solutions are smaller and more nimble than traditional security appliances and help SMEs maintain security and compliance.
- “Security is one of the top things in computing you have to automate . . . because it’s characterized by changing all the time,” says Tamar Newberger, vice president of marketing at Catbird.

complementary to the virtual architecture,” says Newberger.

Unlike physical data centers, virtual data centers don't exactly lend themselves to what Newberger terms the “big, fat honking appliances” that people traditionally have had to purchase. “We got a little lucky. Our architecture never depended on a big honking appliance but was always these stateless devices [that made] perfect sense for virtualized data centers,” she says.

■ Akin To Firewalls

Newberger says that the state of virtualization is akin to the use of standard firewalls within the data center back in the 1990s. “In the early 1990s, only really advanced people had a firewall, and of course, you look back on that now and think it's funny because any router you buy off the shelf at Best Buy is going to have a firewall, and all operating systems have a firewall,” she says.

Newberger says that Catbird wants to get this level of adoption for virtualization security. She believes that within the next 10 years, people will laugh at the notion of not having effective security for virtualized networks much in the way people now laugh at the concept of not having a firewall. “It will be seen as an unnecessary risk,” she says.

However, virtualization security has yet to reach the tipping point. “Right now, people are virtualizing because it's green and it's cost-effective, and while security isn't an afterthought, it isn't necessarily the case that people automatically put security in place when they virtualize,” Newberger says.

Costa adds that although companies of all sizes are now virtualizing their data centers, many implementations fail to have proper security and compliance set up within these new networks even when security is on the road map. “There's a really good chance of getting it very wrong because of the incredible degradation of security that can happen when you virtualize” without altering your security strategies to reflect these new virtual environments, he says.

■ Assessing Virtual Security Needs

One of the problems organizations face when addressing virtual security is knowing what questions to ask. “They've read about it in Gartner and the press, [and] they know they've broken something, but they don't know how to articulate the questions of what they may have broken,” says Newberger.

Through its partners, Catbird offers its trademarked Virtual Security Assessment. The assessment, which takes place over a 30-day period, is a three-step process that evaluates and then analyzes a virtual data center, deploys Catbird's V-Agent virtual appliance that unobtrusively conducts multiple active and passive security monitoring and testing, and at the end of the 30-day period identifies in detail the security deficits in the virtual environment and offers recommendations for how to address them.

■ Shielding The Virtual Environment Automatically

Catbird offers several solutions to retrofit the security in a virtual environment, many of which are well-suited for SMEs. For example, VMShield protects individual virtual machines while at the same time offering a data center the ability to compare given virtual machines to one another.

According to Newberger, mobility is one of the primary characteristics of virtual machines. “You may deploy a virtual machine in Tennessee, but you may decide that those servers in Tennessee are overloaded, and you want to move that virtual machine to Tokyo,” she points out. “Machines should be able to migrate like that—that's what makes virtualization so fun and interesting. But of

course, you need to be able to know where your machine is.”

VMShield works by tracking individual virtual machines in an environment, fingerprinting and performing biometrics on each machine to determine that it is behaving, and stopping it if it isn't. Even better, these actions are automated.

“Security is one of the top things in computing you have to automate . . . because it's characterized by changing all the time,” says Newberger. “It's almost impossible to monitor it as a human.”

■ Changing The Conversation

According to Newberger, discussions about virtual network security tend to focus on utilitarian issues—what has broken and how to fix it. “To us, the more interesting question is how much more secure and compliant can you be because you virtualized?” she says.

“We tend to think you can be significantly more compliant and secure [and that there are] things to take advantage of in virtualization that could be strategic to make you even better than you used to be,” Newberger continues. For example, in a virtual system, IT can implement more effective antivirus strategies because unlike in a physical system, the hypervisor can access the root of the system.

“By virtue of knowing stuff at the root, you might be able to do a lot of prevention and early detection, which is not available in standard antivirus,” says Newberger. “That's why we can't wait to take the conversation to the next level and see how [we can] do better.” ■

by Robyn Weisman

Catbird's Featured Products & Services

Product	Description
HypervisorShield	Protects hypervisor management networks in the same manner that VMShield protects individual virtual machines.
vCompliance	Provides automated compliance monitoring and enforcement for virtual data centers.
Virtual Security Assessment	Analyzes a virtual network to determine its security needs.

VMShield	Protects virtual machines individually so that they may be tracked like physical machines and be compared to other virtual machines within the virtual network.
vSecurity Cloud Edition	Supplies cloud providers with bulletproof security and compliance features.

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