

# Case Study: City of Houston



## Houston uses Proofpoint to eradicate astronomical spam problem

### Houston, we have a problem

The City of Houston was founded in 1836 and currently has the nation's fourth highest population, behind only New York, Los Angeles and Chicago. The city is the largest in the southeastern U.S. with 2.1 million people and has more than 20,000 employees to serve the needs of these residents. Houston is also the center of the U.S. space program and is home to more than 40 colleges, universities and other learning institutions.

Most city employees have an email account as part of their employment. A few years ago, employees started to experience a steady increase in the volume of spam and viruses they received. The problem finally reached the point that it impeded employees' ability to get work done and communicate with residents.

"Because our city council members, in particular, have their email addresses on the web, their email addresses had been harvested by spammers and they were receiving an inordinate amount of spam, even compared to the high percentage that most employees were receiving," said Rick Nicholson, enterprise email administrator for the City of Houston. "Council members complained that they could no longer correspond with their constituents because of this unsolicited email, so we knew we had to take immediate action."

The City of Houston tried to address this problem by using an anti-spam plug-in to its anti-virus solution. This solution worked well at first, blocking more than 160,000 email messages in the first month. But as the amount of unsolicited email grew exponentially—to more than one million messages each month—the software couldn't keep up.

"The solution was very administration-intensive," said Nicholson. "I found that I had to write a lot of filtering rules myself. In fact, about 95% of blocked spam was because of the rules I wrote, not because of the product's built-in features. We needed something that was much more intelligent and easy to maintain."

### Proofpoint light years ahead of the competition

The City of Houston turned to Gartner's Magic Quadrant report to help identify the top players in the messaging security space. In the city's first evaluation, it tested the Proofpoint Messaging Security Gateway appliance. Within the first 30 days, the

### Business challenge

The City of Houston, one of the nation's largest cities, had a huge problem with its employees receiving unsolicited email. Employees were inundated with spam to the extent that it impeded their ability to communicate with city residents. The city tried to solve the problem with a plug-in to its previous anti-virus solution, but the increasing sophistication of spam outsmarted the software, and it required a high degree of management and building rules. The City of Houston needed a solution that could adapt to new threats as they emerged and required very little administration.

### Proofpoint solution

The City of Houston purchased the Proofpoint Messaging Security Gateway™ to protect employees from both spam and viruses. Proofpoint is able to prevent unsolicited email from reaching employees with the industry's highest effectiveness rate, as well as guard against attacks via email, such as viruses, phishing attacks and other forms of malicious code.

### Results achieved

In the first 30 days of test deployment, Proofpoint prevented 2.1 million messages from reaching employees. Proofpoint did this with an astounding degree of accuracy and zero tuning. Currently, Proofpoint blocks nearly five million spam messages and tens of thousands of viruses each month, with near-perfect accuracy.

**"I was astounded at the volume of email that Proofpoint blocked. Proofpoint was by far the best at rooting out spam. Not only that, but it also provided the best tools to our end-users and let them control their incoming email."**

**Rick Nicholson**  
Enterprise Email Admin  
City of Houston

## Case Study: City of Houston

Proofpoint appliance blocked more than two million email messages – representing two-thirds of the city’s total inbound email volume – with no tuning.

“I was astounded at the volume of email that Proofpoint blocked,” said Nicholson. “We had no idea that the problem was that big – simply because our previous solution lacked any reporting tools and still let a lot of spam through the gateway.”

The City of Houston tested several solutions, but found that the Proofpoint deployment worked best. “Proofpoint was by far the best at rooting out spam,” said Nicholson. “Not only that, but it also provided the best tools to our end-users and let them control their incoming email.”

### city administrators over the moon

Proofpoint currently blocks nearly five million unsolicited email messages each month that are destined for city employees with near-perfect accuracy. In addition, the gateway anti-virus features of the appliance automatically adapt to block new viruses that are constantly being unleashed, stopping tens of thousands of viruses from reaching end-users each month.

The Proofpoint Messaging Security Gateway is an easy-to-deploy appliance, powered by Proofpoint MLX™ machine learning technology. Proofpoint MLX analyzes more than 200,000 attributes in every email message in order to accurately identify spam with the industry’s highest accuracy rate. The appliance also helps the City of Houston cope with the huge number of inbound connections generated by spammers and virus outbreaks. The Proofpoint MLX Dynamic Reputation™ feature constantly monitors all connections and terminates those connections that are found to be centers of malicious activity.

“What I like about the Dynamic Reputation – or throttling – feature is that it directly responds to the specific email that we’re receiving, it’s not based on a global database,” said Nicholson. “The Proofpoint appliance automatically ‘refreshes’ the blocked connections, so that if a connection returns to normal, we don’t continue to block it.”

**Proofpoint Products Deployed**  
**Proofpoint Messaging Security Gateway**  
**Proofpoint Spam Detection**  
**Proofpoint Virus Protection**

The City of Houston also uses the Proofpoint’s end-user digest feature, so that employees can monitor their own email quarantines and feel in control of what they are and aren’t receiving. “Even though our employees overwhelmingly want all unsolicited email eliminated from their inboxes, we didn’t want to dictate to

employees what they could and couldn’t receive, so we like that we can give them control through the end-user digest and personalize safe- and block-lists,” said Nicholson.

In addition, the City of Houston also appreciates the fact that Proofpoint can protect the outbound email stream and prevent sensitive information from leaving the network. Nicholson said, “Proofpoint has worked so well at combating our spam problem, so we are glad that we can use Proofpoint for our outbound email in the future.” ➤

### About The City of Houston

Founded in 1836, the City of Houston is the fourth most populous city in the nation, behind only New York, Los Angeles and Chicago. The Houston metro area covers 8,778 square miles, an area slightly smaller than Massachusetts but larger than New Jersey. Each year more than 38 million people fly in and out of Houston’s two major airports. Houston boasts more than 40 colleges, universities and institutions, and more than 90 languages are spoken throughout the Houston area.

### About Proofpoint, Inc.

Proofpoint provides messaging security solutions for large enterprises to stop spam, protect against email viruses, ensure compliance with corporate policies and regulations and defend against leaks of confidential and proprietary information via email and other network protocols. The company’s flagship products, the Proofpoint Messaging Security Gateway™ and Proofpoint Protection Server® provide future-proof messaging security using Proofpoint MLX™ technology, an advanced machine learning system developed by Proofpoint scientists and engineers.

©2006 Proofpoint, Inc. All rights reserved. Proofpoint, Proofpoint Protection Server, Proofpoint Messaging Security Gateway, Proofpoint Regulatory Compliance, Proofpoint Spam Detection, Proofpoint Virus Protection, MLX, MLX Engine, and Dynamic Update Service are trademarks of Proofpoint, Inc. Product and company names listed are trademarks or trade names of their respective companies. 1/06