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Major Puerto Rican Food Service Company Connects 118 Restaurants to a High-Availability Secure Network

For 45 years, Grupo Colón Gerena has built one of the most significant restaurant conglomerates in Puerto Rico. Its portfolio includes Wendy's, Applebee's, LongHorn, Olive Garden, and Sizzler brands. The organization operates 118 restaurants on the Caribbean island, offering fast food, buffet, and table service models. In addition to this core business, the group owns nine real estate companies that manage the properties where their restaurants are located. It also has a construction company that builds its stores and even some for competitors. Today, Grupo Colón Gerena employs approximately 4,500 people.

The organization has seen steady growth in recent years, opening an average of two to three restaurants yearly. This expansion led to a need for more robust network connectivity and security. In response, Grupo Colón Gerena developed a centralized and secure network to support its operations. "With Fortinet, we have a cost-effective solution. The Fortinet Security Fabric platform brings the integration we need to address our challenges as an organization," says Ramón Vázquez, Chief Technology Officer (CTO) of Grupo Colón Gerena.

The Right Solution for Business Needs

In 2017, Grupo Colón Gerena experienced the devastating effects of Hurricane María. The hurricane damaged physical infrastructure, causing restaurants to lose connectivity for essential functions such as credit card transactions, sales reports, and employee time tracking. With MPLS links down at many locations, the group resorted to using cellular hotspots, with some restaurants relying on this solution for over a year. The mobile hotspots worked for essential functions but left out critical services and security.

In response, the company decided to revamp its network infrastructure. Grupo Colón Gerena sought a solution that would provide flexibility in network management, ensure reliable connectivity, and prevent dependence on a single internet provider. The organization already had a FortiGate Next-Generation Firewall (NGFW) at its main office. Working with the Fortinet partner Kryonyx, the group designed a new network architecture to address its connectivity challenges.

The company deployed a FortiGate NGFW at each restaurant and distribution center. As a result, all locations were interconnected within a single network, which was centrally managed and functioning seamlessly to provide uninterrupted connectivity.

GRUPO COLÓN GERENA

"The Fortinet Secure SD-WAN solution enables us to inter-connect all locations within a single, centrally managed network that operates seamlessly to provide uninterrupted connectivity."

Ramón Vázquez,
Chief Technology Officer,
Grupo Colón Gerena

Details

Customer: Grupo Colón Geren

Industry: Retail

Location: Puerto Rico

Number of Secure SD-WAN Locations: 118

Business Impact

- Ensured that core services remain operational even during connectivity failures by deploying a highly available network

- Gained stable connectivity to support new additional services in restaurants, such as self-service machines and drive-through

Fortinet Supports Business with High Availability

Previously, if a restaurant lost its connection, the payment terminals would not work, affecting the image and operation and negatively impacting the business. The company deployed the Fortinet Secure SD-WAN solution to provide continuous connectivity that enables all services to run uninterrupted, creating a highly available network connecting 120 locations: the main office, 118 restaurants, and a distribution center. "With stable connectivity, we can serve customers properly, keep sales running, and have a faster return on investment," mentions Vázquez.

This solution replaced costly MPLS links with more affordable broadband connectivity, resulting in annual savings of nearly $180,000 with approximately 18-month ROI.

This new communication platform was the foundation for supporting new projects, such as self-service kiosks implemented in about 15 restaurants. These kiosks rely heavily on internet connectivity for order placement and payments.

While mobile hotspots remain backup links, Grupo Colón Gerena plans to integrate them into the Fortinet Security Fabric platform with a FortiExtender solution. This integration will provide complete and seamless support for all restaurant functions, addressing the limitations of the previous infrastructure. "We can now open a restaurant and use the ISP with the best service or price in the area. The Fortinet solution offers cost advantages, flexibility, and scalability, allowing us to grow our business effectively," highlights Vázquez.

Improved Efficiency and Security Across the Entire Network

The previous technology could not support the number of access points at the restaurants, frequently taking locations offline. The IT team must travel to each restaurant to fix the failures, as the equipment could not be managed centrally. Additionally, it was impossible to segment network traffic, and critical operational services would stop working in restaurants with high traffic due to the large number of diners. In some cases, it was necessary to turn off connectivity for visitors, which consequently impacted the guest experience.

Looking for a solution, Grupo Colón Gerena deployed 180 FortiAP access points at all locations in Puerto Rico. This infrastructure, integrated seamlessly with the FortiGate NGFW, provides high-quality connectivity to support both business activities and customers visiting the restaurants. With the FortiAPs, the organization can now configure internet traffic so that core services such as payments or order-taking in drive-through locations run smoothly, something that was previously unachievable.

The network performance under the Fortinet architecture has significantly improved. Previously, routing all restaurant traffic through the main office caused network congestion. Now, each restaurant operates autonomously, reducing traffic at the main office and enabling appropriate network segmentation tailored to each location's needs. Security is an intrinsic part of the Fortinet solution; each restaurant benefits from an additional layer of security independent of the main office and not reliant on the type of connection being used.

The group's positive experience with Fortinet LAN equipment has led to the integration of additional solutions. Today, 11 restaurants have FortiSwitch secure Ethernet switches, increasing the security and availability of all communication networks. Likewise, new constructions incorporate FortiSwitches by default.

Business Impact (cont.)

- Achieved 70% savings in management and configuration time compared to the previous solution

- Achieved annual savings of $180,000 by replacing MPLS links with an 18-month ROI

Solutions

- FortiGate Next-Generation Firewall

- Fortinet Secure SD-WAN

- FortiSwitch

- FortiAP

- FortiManager

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Flexible Platform with Centralized Management

One of Fortinet's great differentiators for Grupo Colón Gerena is the unified and centralized management offered by the Fortinet Security Fabric platform. With FortiManager, the company can manage and configure all Fortinet devices from a single console and define and enforce security policies, access controls, and configurations. Staff from the central office now manage wireless connectivity for all the restaurants, and the company's IT team can make configurations without visiting each location. Previously, adjusting an access point took an hour. Today, the job is done in a few minutes.

Grupo Colón Gerena finds this capability especially valuable when performing mass updates, adding additional rules to the network, or opening a new restaurant. The organization's IT manager can log in from a single location and deploy the desired configurations using templates. With this standardized management, the Group can also avoid errors that might occur with manual adjustments. The company estimates that the flexibility and unification of network management have provided 70% in time savings. The IT team has not grown recently, even though the organization has opened more restaurants.

For Grupo Colón Gerena, centralization is critical to seamless operations. "Fortinet provides an integrated solution with a platform where all elements are interconnected and operate synchronously. This allows us to easily keep everything up to date, ensuring smooth and seamless operation for all users," concludes Vázquez.

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