

KACE Scales to Larger Enterprises

Abstract

Continuing its focus on the needs of the midmarket, KACE has recently announced enhancements to its line of KBOX systems management appliances that collectively make the products more attractive to larger businesses in that market space. These advances are being offered without an increase in the cost of the solutions and directly challenge larger systems management vendors that have been targeting the same customer base.

Enterprise Management Associates (EMA) recommends both consumers and vendors review how these improvements increase the attractiveness of the KBOX appliances from KACE to a broader base of potential customers.

KACE Announces Enhancement to Its KBOX Appliances

On October 15, 2007, KACE announced a series of functional enhancement to its line of KBOX automated systems management appliances that directly address the needs of the larger end of its targeted market, generally viewed to be between 5,000 and 10,000 nodes.

Included in KACE's announcement is enhanced functionality for both of its KBOX appliances solutions. The KBOX 1000 Series Systems Management Appliance boasts a new patch and vulnerability management facility available from direct integration with OEM application, Lumension, formerly known as PatchLink. Additionally, KACE has expanded the KBOX 1000 administrative capabilities with role-based permissions and the ability to create policies for customized help desks. The KBOX 2000 Systems Deployment Appliance also broadens its abilities with state management to support both physical and virtual nodes, improved image editing, and support for iSCSI implementations.

KACE is providing these enhancements without any increase in either the base costs of the products or in maintenance charges. The new release will be distributed as a version update for the KBOX 1000 Series (version 4.0) and the KBOX 2000 Series (version 2.1), and existing customers will receive the update free with their maintenance contracts.

Catering to the Fortune 100,000 Community

Since its inception, KACE has focused its development towards an often overlooked end-user marketplace, the midmarket, or what has been called the Fortune 100,000 community. In brief,

the Fortune 100,000 represent enterprises that are comprised of greater than 100 employees but that generate less revenue than the top 1000 businesses. Primarily because of the inherently smaller budgets, these businesses face a number of unique challenges not faced by their high revenue cousins within the Fortune 1000 while needing to support most, if not all, of the same IT requirements. For example, larger businesses often employ multiple teams for IT support that specialize in particular disciplines (UNIX Support teams, Windows Support teams, network support teams, security, messaging, storage and so on) so packages are often specifically designed to support each of these specialized areas and assume a separate specialized level of knowledge. The Fortune 100,000, on the other hand, often combine IT support with only a few – and sometimes only one – support centers. This means IT administrators have to wear many hats to cover all the common business IT requirements. They need to quickly learn to use completely different applications, tools and interfaces in areas they've had little or no previous exposure to. KACE's automated appliance solutions have been developed to specifically address the Fortune 100,000 needs, like eliminating this "swivel chair administration" practice, to allow these businesses to compete fairly against their more affluent competitors. (For more information on this market space, see the EMA white paper, "Addressing the IT Requirements of the Fortune 100,000".)

This Fortune 100,000 should not be confused with what is often referenced as the Small to Medium Business (SMB) market. The key differentiator here is that the Fortune 100,000 includes some businesses which are too large to be considered an SMB but which simply do not generate enough revenue to be included in the Fortune 1000 market. These larger businesses struggle with the same challenges as their smaller counterparts – cost restrictions, insufficient resources and staffing, broad support requirements without specialized teams to address them – but they often have additional problems indicative in maintaining a larger IT infrastructure. With the release of new features to its KBOX line of Systems Management Appliances, KACE has positioned itself to better support this larger end of the Fortune 100,000 community.

New KBOX Functionality

New features announced for the various KACE KBOX appliance solutions include:

- Patch and Vulnerability Management – Following the recently announced partnership with Lumension Security, KACE is now able to provide OEM PatchLink functionality.

Lumension's assessment and remediation engine is now directly embedded into the KBOX 1000 Series appliances to provide enterprise-level patch management. Additionally, this functionality provides access to Lumension's extensive vulnerability metadata database. This integrated product utilizes a single common agent with KBOX and is accessed through a single common web-based user interface, significantly enhancing security and ease-of-use.

- Policy-based Help Desk Functionality – Creates queues, ticket workflow rules, and enables e-mail-based ticket management. Multiple support teams can each manage their own help desk through a centralized interface.
- Role-Based Permissions – Access can be customized for specific job functions, geographies, or roles, to further simplify access by limiting it to only the facilities necessary for a particular job function. Since system-wide “super-user” access can be limited to only those needing that broad access, security is also greatly improved.
- State Management – As virtualization continues to be adopted across the business community, the need for simplified methods for managing both physical and virtual states across a large number of nodes becomes equally critical. KACE's new State Management functionality, which has been integrated into the KBOX Systems Deployment Appliance (2000 Series), provides this management ability to provision, re-provision and configure virtual and physical systems at the file level.
- Improved Image Editing – Configuration images can now be created and managed through a centralized interface, significantly improving the amount of control administrators have over the deployment process.
- iSCSI Support – By broadening support to include the Internet SCSI protocol, enabling image management over Storage Area Networks (SAN), customers can now access any storage device without restriction.

EMA's Perspective

KACE has managed to maintain a strong presence in the mid-size business market primarily due to the cost-effectiveness of its products. In a recent lifecycle management product evaluation, EMA determined KBOX from KACE to be the most affordable product in this space, with pricing as low as 25% of the cost of other solutions. This is a critical factor for a business community that functions on smaller revenues than larger enterprises, but must confront as great a breadth of IT challenges. IT managers not only work with smaller budgets, but they feel greater pressure to justify expenditures with quantifiable return on investment.

Although price is also a factor for larger businesses that are part of the Fortune 100,000 community, their greater size puts an increased emphasis on the need for additional functionality to deal with the added complexity of multiple networks, a wider range of platforms to maintain, and a larger end-user base to support. For this reason, many larger Fortune 100,000 businesses have chosen to invest in more feature rich (and more expensive) systems management solutions such as Symantec's Altiris, LANDesk, and Microsoft's Systems Management Server (SMS). Customers of these broader system management packages may be tempted to “ho-hum” the new KACE features as functionality that has been widely in use among the high-end packages for quite some time, but, if so, they are missing the most important point – KACE has provided these features without increasing the base cost of their products.

All other things being equal, price *does* matter, and as KACE continues to close the gap in functionality with more costly solutions, they become more attractive to the larger Fortune 100,000 businesses. They still have a ways to go, and would do well to improve support for more complex network topologies that include multiple domains, firewalls, DMZs and portable systems. If KACE can manage to expand the scope of its products without incurring significant cost increases, it will maintain a strong position from which it can challenge its competitors in the Fortune 100,000 market space.

Other system management vendors looking to address the needs of the Fortune 100,000 community should look very closely at the powerful positioning KACE's pricing strategy has provided. They should consider either offering trimmed-down versions of their products at competitive prices or outpace KACE with development enhancements – such as automated remediation, configuration intelligence, and provisioning for virtual environments – that are (or will be) of great need to medium-large businesses.

It would be hard for anyone to deny that cost plays a major roll in an IT management decision on purchasing operational support applications. Getting the most “bang for the buck” is a mantra common to nearly any business, and KACE has managed to increase the size of the “bang” without increasing the size of the “buck.” Enterprise Management Associates (EMA) recommends IT managers carefully review their business IT needs before committing to any systems management solution. Large Fortune 100,000 businesses, however, are now more likely to find those needs fall in-line with the enhanced capabilities of the KBOX solutions from KACE, and at a price that will even make their CFO smile.