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A drop of ingenuity goes a long way

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The appeal of Web-based e-mail is twofold. First, it allows users to access their e-mail from any browser-based platform, and second it provides easier administration because there is no client to install, support or upgrade. However, one company, Droplets, has developed an interesting technology that uses a small, generic client to deliver e-mail and other applications to the desktop with much lower bandwidth requirements than traditional Web mail.

Droplets Email 2.0, the current iteration of the Droplets mail system, requires that the user download a 900K-byte client that provides the user interface for all Droplets' applications. This client, which works with all versions of Windows and MacOS and which will soon support PalmOS and wireless devices, is required for the GUI presentation and for communicating user events to the Droplets User Interface server. The client can be run either as a stand-alone, desktop-based application or as an applet window in a Web page. Communication between the client and the Droplets server uses TCP/IP and HTTP protocols.

Droplets Email provides all of the features available in conventional Web mail systems, but offers up to a 90% reduction in bandwidth requirements compared to Web-based e-mail. In addition, Droplets Email provides new message alerts even when the application is closed and it operates like a stand-alone e-mail client directly from the user's desktop without the use of a browser. Droplets Email also integrates with Internet Messaging Access Protocol mail servers and can be run through a firewall. Droplets offers a version of its product for Ipswitch IMail.

A key feature of the Droplets technology is that the generic client also runs any Droplets-enabled application in addition to e-mail. Standard messaging applications offered by the company include Direct Messenger, an instant messaging application; and Discussion, an online chat room product. The Droplets User Interface Server also includes a standards-based software development capability that permits C++ and Java developers to create customized, Droplets-based applications.

Because Droplets applications can be branded, Droplets Email makes sense for ISPs and others looking to offer customized e-mail functionality to a large user base. Further, because the product offers the potential for significant bandwidth savings compared to regular Web mail, Droplets is certainly worth a look for organizations that are considering deployment of e-mail to non-infoworkers.