

Fiber-line mishap exposes host's redundancy failure

05/19/2003 09:15 AM

By Jeff Miller

Last Tuesday at about 6:30 a.m., a subcontractor for the Big Dig ripped through a fiber line in South Boston that connected a Web hosting facility operated by Dallas-based Allegiance Telecom Inc. to the public Internet.

And in an unrelated event the day after the cut, Allegiance, which provides telecom services to businesses in 36 U.S. markets, filed for Chapter 11 bankruptcy protection.

As a result of the cut, Web surfers couldn't load the Web sites of many Northeast organizations.

Boston-based **Verosity Technology Partners** helped Allegiance restore service by about 5:30 p.m. by temporarily provisioning a 100-megabit Ethernet line from the Prudential Center.

Affected sites included Boston.com, the Massachusetts Turnpike Authority and its Big Dig site, the Massachusetts Bay Transportation Authority (MBTA), the Massachusetts Telecommunications Council and Light Reading Inc.

Asked how many businesses were affected, Michael Caputo, a spokesperson for Allegiance, said, "That's competitive information, but in the thousands of businesses."

At least some Allegiance customers were under the impression that the South Boston hosting site had a redundant connection to the Internet. That wasn't the case.

"It's always been told to us that they have redundancy in their systems," said Michael Oh, owner of Boston-based Tech Superpowers, an eight-employee IT consulting company that uses Allegiance's Hosting.com service to host the Web sites of about 150 clients.

"To find out that a single fiber cut would cause this kind of outage was a surprise," Oh said.

Randy Brandenburg, Boston.com's vice president of product and technology, had been under the same impression.

"I believe they do disclose that they have redundant connectivity to the facility," Brandenburg said.

Royce Holland, Allegiance's chairman and chief executive officer, said he didn't know whether his company had misrepresented to customers that the Boston hosting site had a redundant connection.

"I would hope not," Holland said. "It's certainly a violation of company policy to tell customers something that isn't true."

Allegiance was working on leasing a redundant path from White Plains, N.Y.-based Metromedia Fiber Network Inc. when the cut occurred, Holland said. MFN could not be reached for comment.

Caputo added that the Big Dig operations had complicated these efforts.

"That's the only place in the country that we didn't have a redundant path," Holland said.

Since the cut, however, Holland said Allegiance has obtained a redundant fiber connection to the hosting facility. The cut, he said, "accelerated the process."

The day after the fiber cut, Allegiance filed for Chapter 11 bankruptcy protection.

Ironically, Allegiance formed its Hosting.com service in 2001 after buying the hosting assets of Malden-based HarvardNet in bankruptcy court and then merging those assets with those of another acquisition.

Allegiance isn't broke. The company still has about \$250 million in cash. But the company is losing money, posting a \$120.1 million loss on \$204.6 million in revenue for the first quarter of this year, and is carrying a \$1.2 billion debt load.

In the fall, Allegiance pledged to worried creditors that it would cut its debt in half by April 30. It didn't meet that goal and went into default, though creditors gave the company an extension until May 15.

Unable to negotiate a settlement, Allegiance declared bankruptcy after the close of markets May 14.

"We're contacting all customers today," Holland said on May 15, "and will be operating the same tomorrow as we did four days ago. It's business as usual."

But the outage, combined with Allegiance's financial woes, has moved some customers to seek another provider.

"We're going to find another hosting service to replace (Allegiance), said Warren Hultquist, director of Web operations for Light Reading, a New York-based media company that publishes online telecom, storage and wireless industry news.

Last week's outage was the second time a fiber cut has knocked Light Reading off the Internet, Hultquist said.

"The other aspect is that Allegiance is not too healthy financially, and we're not comfortable with that situation," Hultquist said. "It's not likely that the fiber would go dark, but you don't know what might happen."

Boston.com, on the other hand, doesn't plan to leave Allegiance. Brandenburg said he's been pleased with the company's service up to this point. Nevertheless, he is looking for another provider to compliment Allegiance.

For Boston.com, the problem wasn't a lack of connection to its servers. It had previously purchased a redundant connection through another provider.

But both the primary and secondary domain name service (DNS) nodes for Boston.com's site were stored at Allegiance's Boston facility. So while the site's servers were still connected to the Internet, lack of access to a DNS code made it impossible for users' browsers to find the Boston.com servers.

Boston.com had been aware of the danger, Brandenburg said, and was just weeks away from implementing a backup DNS as part of a June 4 Web site redesign and the installation of an open source content management system.

Other customers will take a wait-and-see approach.

"We've been through that process before," said Oh at Tech Superpowers. His last provider gave him 90 days notice to move 150 clients out of its facility when it decided to leave the Massachusetts market.

"We did it then, we could do it again, but we'd rather not," Oh said.

But even if Oh had to go with another provider, finding a healthier hosting service than Allegiance may pose a challenge, said Sarah Ducharme, CEO at Everett-based New England Network Group, a small IT consultancy that has helped its clients find hosting services.

"It's hard to make recommendations today because there's so much uncertainty about their financial condition," Ducharme said. "You don't know whether they'll be around in six months."