

IT Channel News:

VAR reactions mixed on NetApp's StoreVault move

By John Moore, Contributor
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It's been four months since NetApp discontinued a channel-centric SMB product line, and storage solutions providers view the aftermath through dramatically different lenses.

NetApp Inc. in late January issued an end-of-life (EOL) notice for its S Family line, formerly known as StoreVault. Some customers and resellers voiced dismay with the decision. Resellers of rival platforms, meanwhile look upon the situation as a chance to wrest business from NetApp. Other VARs loyal to NetApp report brisk business for the FAS2020 product, which the company has positioned as an alternative to the S Family.

Since the EOL announcement, Davenport Group has targeted a marketing effort at S Family customers. The St. Paul, Minn., company specializes in storage management and data recovery.

"When NetApp discontinued that line, they really did damage some relationships," said Paul Clifford, president of the Davenport Group. "In realizing that, we have actually targeted those customers ... to give them an alternative."

Davenport Group carries Compellent's network storage systems. Clifford said his company has had about 10 solid conversations with potential converts. None have inked deals yet, but Clifford said three prospects may come to fruition in the next 90 to 120 days. He said two of those are running short on space and need to upgrade while the third is nearing the end of a maintenance contract and doesn't plan to renew.

"The reason they are very interested in going elsewhere is because they had the rug pulled out from underneath them," Clifford said.

Other solution providers, however, view the end of the S Family positively. Jim

Smid, data center practice manager for Apptis Technology Solutions (ATS), said the discontinuation helps clarify NetApp's product set. Smid said he, as well as his customers, found the StoreVault line confusing from its launch in 2006. While NetApp had been emphasizing a unified architecture, StoreVault brought with it a different operating system.

"People like NetApp because it's simple -- a common architecture and common operating system," Smid said.

He said customers appreciate the architectural consistency of the FAS2020. He noted that buyers with space considerations also like the product's small form factor.

"We've had some good customer adoption of the 2020," he said.

ATS is a NetApp Star partner, the highest level of the NetApp Partner Program. But NetApp has worked to convince S Family partners, which participated in a separate channel program for StoreVault, to stay with the company and sell such systems as the FAS2020.

Debbie Medal, senior director of worldwide channel communications and programs at NetApp, said S Family VARs were invited to join the Silver level of the NetApp Partner Program and that the majority agreed to do so. According to NetApp, about 800 partners worldwide moved from the StoreVault program to the NetApp Partner Program.

For some resellers, the direct impact of StoreVault's demise was blunted by a simple fact: They were never significantly invested in the product line to begin with.

Stranded S Family users haven't been an issue for ATS, as few customers adopted the product, Smid noted.

That's also the observation of Mike Linett, president of Zerowait Corp., which provides service, support and upgrades for NetApp gear. He said customers never embraced the S Family line. In addition, sales through the channel proved difficult, given the product's price point, he said. Linett suggested resellers couldn't sell enough of the low-end units to make a salesperson's salary.

However, The I.T. Pros invested a significant amount of time and effort into learning and promoting the StoreVault line when it was first launched, said Doug Ford, president of the San Diego consulting and managed services firm.

Ford said StoreVault "fit a price/performance niche that desperately needed filling," and added that his company was disappointed when NetApp ceased selling the line.

But The I.T. Pros cultivates relationships with other storage vendors occupying the same price/performance niche that StoreVault once filled, Ford noted. NetApp remains among those vendors.

"We are pleased to see them offer a FAS line that is comparable in price and more aligned with their mid-sized and enterprise-class solutions in both hardware configurations and operating system," Ford said.

Indeed, NetApp now focuses on the upper reaches of the mid-sized enterprise market with products such as the FAS2020. Todd Palmer, vice president of channel sales for the Americas at NetApp, said that recently released FAS2020 product bundles offer a better price point for that market segment, which he said tops out at 1,000-employee organizations. Palmer said NetApp has also reduced the number of SKUs to simplify the ordering process.