

**McAfee: Antivirus to Bloatware**

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### **Introduction**

If one has bought a new Windows computer in the last decade, it is highly probable that before even one's favorite web browser is fully installed, an icon with a red 'M' pops up on the desktop or even fills the screen. This is the notorious logo for McAfee antivirus; what started out as one of the world's first and best antivirus solutions has recently become what many in the industry term "bloatware" or apps automatically installed with a computer that provide no functionality other than taking up space, memory, and a struggle to uninstall. McAfee antivirus is the flagship product of McAfee Corporation (or McAfee Associates, Inc), a cybersecurity business that has had several failures in the last few decades leading it to fall in ranks for cybersecurity products and services.

### **Background (Who, When, Where, Why)**

What is colloquially now known as McAfee was started in 1987 as McAfee Associates by its founder, John McAfee. McAfee worked various software jobs throughout his life before becoming a programmer for Lockheed. During the time he worked there, he became intrigued with the first MS-DOS computer virus, Brain. While studying the Brain virus, he came to the conclusion that the only way to defend against these types of programs would be developing a similar one that could detect and hunt for them. With this realization, the concept of an antivirus solution was born and McAfee soon left Lockheed to create his company that would innovate such solutions for consumers and businesses alike. The initial name of this company was McAfee Associates and was originally based out of Delaware before being re-headquartered to this day in San Jose, California (Cybersecurity Profiles, 2017).

### **The Rise of McAfee**

At the time of its creation, McAfee's antivirus, VirusScan, was the first of its kind. It became the first antivirus solution in the technology market at a time when this market was growing rapidly. Despite an unconventional revenue model where individuals could use the product for free and only companies had to pay for licensing, the company was profitable enough early on for McAfee to work on the antivirus full-time in 1989 (Cybersecurity Profiles, 2017). This revenue model is now extremely popular, especially in the technology and cybersecurity spaces.

Another key component to McAfee's success as a business and an antivirus product itself came in the increasing number of computer viruses being released and gaining media attention in the 1990s. At the time, not much was truly known about this type of malware, so consumers looked to security experts like John McAfee for information and advice. A well-known example comes in the Michelangelo virus that was discovered as a logic bomb that would release its payload on March 6 to make device files unusable. John McAfee, when asked about how widespread such a virus could be, gave reporters a range of 5,000 to 5 million affected computers. Running with this, the news reported the five million affected computers, sending a massive amount of consumers to look for antivirus solutions when they otherwise would not have been in the market for one. With McAfee being at the forefront of the market at the time, they sustained a bigger share of this market surge and helped keep them at the top of the industry (First Malware Scare, 2022).

### **The Fall: Unsuccessful Mergers & Acquisitions**

Despite its early success in the market with its antivirus product, McAfee Associates quickly felt the need to merge with other companies in order to exist in multiple markets in the cybersecurity industry. The first change came in 1997 when it merged with Network General "in

an effort to create a cybersecurity company that focused on endpoint and network security” (Sheridan, 2020). Despite their similarities in mission for protecting against cyber threats, the combination of endpoint antivirus and network security solutions was “a mix that ‘continues to fail as a strategy,’” according to an industry analyst, Richard Stiennon (Sheridan, 2020). This strategy failure comes from the fact that network defenses and desktop support like McAfee’s main product very rarely have the same consumer base or internal teams necessary for support. This failure did not come quickly, though, and McAfee continued the same strategy to acquire more companies that were focusing on prominent industry topics like data security and regulatory requirements. They then also bought out smaller companies with other features in the enterprise security space like Enterecept, IntruVert, and Foundstone. This led to what would be the lynchpin of their downfall: too many features with not enough trust.

With so many acquisitions came numerous add-ons to what was once a simple but extremely effective endpoint antivirus solution. Analysts and consumers alike now note :McAfee to be so “feature-heavy” that it “[slows] down endpoints with its multitudes of endpoint-scanning technologies” (Sheridan, 2020); this is one of the most significant drawbacks of any cybersecurity solution since very few consumers will sacrifice the health and efficiency of their machine for security. This drawback also planted the seed in what continues to be their biggest failure on the individual consumer market, a lack of customer trust and satisfaction in those using their technologies.

During the time of this fall for the individual consumers, McAfee was still considered relatively okay in the US government clientele until the late 2000s. The company gained a new CEO, Dave DeWalt, who would then sell the company to Intel in 2010. With it, the industry lost even more trust in McAfee since it is almost impossible to blend hardware vendors and an

antivirus software together and be successful. Despite the evolving nature of cybersecurity technologies in the next few years, McAfee's innovation lulled and many of its lead technologists left to either "found, or work for, future competitors" including Kevin Mandia of Mandiant and George Kurtz of CrowdStrike (Sheridan, 2020). During this time, McAfee was then rebranded as Intel Security before once again re-launching as an independent company under Chris Young as CEO where he promised to "eliminate non-core products, debut new enterprise tools, and update its market strategy" (Sheridan, 2020). Unfortunately, their strategy remained the same after leaving Intel where they continued to acquire more companies to update their core solution to be relevant with today's cyber threats including cloud technologies and artificial intelligence.

### **Lessons To Be Learned**

McAfee antivirus solutions faced, and continues to face, one of the biggest challenges of the technology industry: to stay relevant with rapidly evolving technologies and cyber threats. However, how a company tackles this challenge seems to be the key to its long-term success. The 26 acquisitions over two decades were not the downfall of McAfee alone, but were instead a symptom of their lack of vision in their own product evolution (McAfee - 26 Acquisitions, 2024). To remain relevant, cybersecurity companies must be able to fulfill the "innovation and nimbleness" that such a market demands (Vijayan, 2016). Usually, the best route to fulfill this is with a focus on evolving existing internal technologies rather than just acquiring new ones. In the case of McAfee, many analysts believe that "security acquisitions without thinking through whether it's a fit with their existing business" was where it all fell apart (Vijayan, 2016). With McAfee still on the market, albeit with much less trust and loyal consumer base than they had

twenty years ago, only time will tell if they can learn from these mistakes and bring their products back to the top of the endpoint security solution marketplace as it once was.

### **Personal Opinion**

In my opinion, McAfee's failure is one that happens quite often with a lot of cybersecurity startups where one wants to move quickly in the market, sacrificing consumer trust and their own mission. What makes them different is that it does not appear that McAfee has learned from its mistakes post Intel-acquisition-and-deacquisition. They continue to acquire new businesses and simply add on to their services rather than finding ways to integrate them cohesively. As someone who has worked in the cybersecurity support space for a few years, I understand McAfee's desire to be able to protect against all types of threats with the simplicity of one platform, but unless they can do it well, it only hurts them. Even today, very few industry professionals I know of would recommend McAfee antivirus over the built-in Windows Defender. Many of them also tend to point to McAfee being the problem when a customer calls with a slow computer. From a cybersecurity standpoint, when the product designed to keep a computer healthy becomes the very reason it isn't functional, it is hard to come back from that level of industry and consumer distrust. As a whole, the McAfee failures are ones that are becoming all-too-common in the technology industry, but have some imperative lessons for aspiring entrepreneurs in the field to learn: the value of knowing one's product and its role in the ever-evolving cybersecurity ecosystem.

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