BACK TO INDEX

Technology
Take a Bite Out of Spam

Spam, spam, spam, e-mail and more spam. What to do?

by Martin B. Schneiderman

In a Monty Python skit, Vikings in a café sing loudly about Spam—the well-known brand of processed luncheon meat in a can—drowning out a couple ordering dinner and everybody else's conversation, too. This is the origin of the term spam that refers to unsolicited commercial e-mail. Most spam of the cyberspace variety is pure junk, and much of the content is really offensive.

Have you noticed that since last summer the amount of spam that you've been receiving has increased dramatically? You're not alone. Industry sources report that in mid 2001, junk e-mail volume increased by almost 200 percent. It's now a problem of epidemic proportions and getting worse.

Jupiter Media Metrix predicts that at the rate spam is growing, by 2006, 43 percent of all incoming messages will be unsolicited junk e-mail. That's 3,846 junk e-mail messages per person, annually. I recently received the following plea from a client:

"I get about 180 junk messages every few days that are nothing but garbage. I already have a Yahoo! account that I use exclusively with potential junk providers, such as online retail sites. I can't figure out how I got onto so many lists, and even when I try to remove myself, the impact is minimal, if any at all. Help!"

What You Can Do

Never reply to spam. Never be tempted to select the option "remove me from your mailing list" and never click on any URL or Web site address that is contained within the spam e-mail message. In almost every case you'll get even more junk e-mail, because you've confirmed that yours is a live address.

Ignore offers to stop spam. Don't respond to sites that claim that they can remove your e-mail address from a "spammer's" mail list.

Don't post your e-mail address on a Web site. Spammers use "harvesting" software that automatically scans Web sites and lists for e-mail addresses.

Use a private e-mail address. Use a separate e-mail address for personal online purchases and newsgroups.

Be selective about giving out your e-mail address. Always check privacy and use terms first. If in doubt, don't.

Use commercial spam filters. This is built-in to all of the popular Web-based e-mail systems such as AOL, Hotmail and Yahoo!Mail. Software can be installed on individual PCs, and networks, too, that scans all incoming messages and does its best to route suspected messages to junk e-mail folders. But no filter will trap all junk e-mail. Be careful, because a filter can inadvertently identify and delete legitimate messages.

Create custom rules. Use your e-mail programs to create custom rules to screen and route all incoming messages. Experiment and implement these carefully. If rules are too strict, then legitimate messages won't get through. If they're too lax, then they won't be effective.

I've created a rule that checks all my incoming messages and sends them directly to my inbox if they're from the people listed in my address book. Everything else is screened aggressively by other rules. This works more than 90 percent of the time—and I check daily for "false positives."

Use a security program. Use programs such as Norton Internet Security (**www.symantec.com**) that secures your e-mail address and all other personal information, such as credit card and social security numbers, too.

Notify the sender's Internet service provider. This can help only a bit, and it's very time consuming.

Help make spam illegal. Contact the FCC and Congress to enact legislation and enforce laws to make spam illegal. Congress has proposed different bills, but none have passed, as yet. This is long overdue and the best long-term approach.

Useful Links

l Coalition Against Unsolicited Commercial Email (**www.cauce.org**)

l Spam Abuse (**spam.abuse.net**)

l Information on setting a spam filter in three popular e-mail programs: (**www.pcworld.com/resource/printable/article/0,aid,52352,00.asp**)

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*Martin B. Schneiderman is president of Information Age Associates, Inc., (**www.iaa.com**), a firm specializing in the design, management, and support of information systems for grantmakers and nonprofits. He can be reached at **mbs@iaa.com**.*

Back to Index