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Dealing with Unsolicited Commercial E-mail

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UF Information Technology

UFIT

2046 NE Waldo Rd, Suite 2100
Gainesville Florida 32609-8942
(352) 392.2061
<editor@cns.ufl.edu>
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Dealing with Unsolicited Commercial E-mail

This is the final segment in our three-part series about spam (junk) e-mail on the Internet. The previous installments were: "Dealing with Spam E-mail" (Part I, February 1998 /Update) and "How to Recognize Urban Legends" (Part II, April 1998 /Update).

The "UCE Q&A" section of this article was written by Internet "Tourbus" list co-author Bob Rankin, and is reprinted with his permission.

Now that you know what spam mail is (SPAM: How to Recognize Urban Legends, /Update, April 1998), let's move on to Unsolicited Commercial E-mail, or UCE.

UCE is a particular breed of spam, but not all spam is UCE. UCE is the most annoying of all junk mail. Whereas, your friends had good intentions about sending you that annoying cookie recipe story or the child dying of cancer who wants nectarines, UCE is a high-tech bother. Junk e-mailers typically spend little of their own money to reach you and will take any path necessary to get to you: strip-mining addresses from Usenet mail groups, America Online (AOL) Chat Rooms, sending robots across the Web to harvest e-mail addresses, and so on. UCE mailers want you to send their chain letters, buy their (mostly) non-existent services, get sucked into multi-level (read: pyramid) schemes, etc.

From the spammer's point of view, the Internet is a gold-mine: write a message, hit a button and reach thousands of potential customers. The problem with this is that many of those "customers" don't even acknowledge the e-mail from the spammers. According to a survey by the Graphics, Visualization, and Usability Center of Georgia Institute of Technology (http://www.gvu.gatech.edu/user_surveys/, select the seventh survey), 61 percent of UCE recipients delete the spam mail without even reading it. Another 19 percent asked to be removed from future mailing lists (a tactic that seldom works, but more on that later), 11 percent read the message and 5 percent retaliate. UCE wastes bandwidth, computing cycles, and your time that could be better spent with your children or an episode of Seinfeld.

UCE Q&A

This section is reprinted with permission from the Internet "Tourbus" list co-author Bob Rankin. Rankin recaps a question and answer session with a user trying to deal appropriately with UCE.

"Q: I've read about sites where you can register yourself as a "no spam" address. Are these legit, and how can we know that these sites will not misuse the addresses they receive?

A: You can't be sure, and I recommend that you NOT use them. Some of these sites are merely collection points run by spammers to obtain valid e-mail addresses. This is ESPECIALLY TRUE for the IEMMC.ORG site! It's run by a notorious consortium of spammers, and it's been shown that registering here actually increases spam levels.

Q: I faithfully send in REMOVE requests whenever I get unsolicited e-mail. But I'm still getting spam-more than ever. What's up?

A: If you send REMOVE requests this tells the spammers two things: (1) your e-mail address
is valid; and (2) you read the e-mail you receive. Thus, you are a perfect target for more spam. This is why I recommend that people DO NOT send REMOVE requests.

Q: What about those services that claim they work with the major spam factories, and offer to remove your name from all spam lists for $25?

A: They claim to work with the major spammers, but the major spammers DON'T WANT to remove people from their lists. Even if they are not crooks, it's likely that they have little or no power to deliver on their promises. And they can't do anything to stop the army of small-time spammers with lists of their own.

Q: How can these companies get away with selling bulk e-mail software that makes it easy for people to spam the Net? Isn't spamming illegal, by extension of the "junk fax" laws in the USA?

A: Spamming is obnoxious, but not illegal. There are several pieces of anti-spam legislation being considered in the USA, one of which would extend the "junk fax law" to cover e-mail spam, but it's not likely that we'll see any new anti-spam laws in 1997. And any law passed by the U.S. Congress would have no power outside the USA.

Q: I have a program called Spam Hater, which sends nastygrams to spammers and their service providers, but most of the messages it generates bounce right back to me. Why?

A: Spammers typically forge the headers in their e-mail so the true sending address cannot be determined. Spam Hater will only be effective against newbie spammers who don't know how to cover their tracks.

Q: I read that Sanford "Spamford" Wallace, head of the notorious CyberPromo spamhaus, got booted off the Net by his service provider. Is this a victory for anti-spam crusaders?

A: No. Spamford is suing his ex-provider, and even if he loses, it won't be long before another ISP gives him a new home. Wallace made money first in the junk fax biz, and then got rich by spamming (he drives a Rolls Royce), so getting kicked off the net is no big deal to him-this is the sixth time.

Q: Okay, so no-spam registries, remove requests and anti-spam software are all useless. The spammers are running wild and there are no laws on the horizon to stop them. What can I do?

A: Press the Delete key, and get on with your life. Really. I get more spam than most people (dozens every day) and this is the best advice I can offer. Depressing, ain't it?

Some people prefer to install spam filters in their e-mail program. Go to http://www.Yahoo.com [http://www.yahoo.com] and search on "spam filter". If you use AOL, you're at the mercy of their Mail Controls, which can filter certain spammer domains, but still miss quite a bit.

As a geek and fan of non-intrusive government, I think a technical solution to the spam problem is preferable to a legislative one. But for now we'll have to keep hammering that Delete key."

**What Else Can I Do?**

Some users prefer to take matters into their own hands and report the spammer's abuse of the
Internet. Reporting the abuse sometimes requires some detective work on the part of the spampee, which if you don't have time for it, just do as Rankin recommends above and hit the Delete key.

If you do have energy and resources to track down the spammer, the channels the message flowed through, and report the problem, here's a resource that can help you in your sleuthing work:

John C. Rivard wrote an excellent tutorial that takes users step-by-step through figuring out the actual address of spammers. He also includes suggestions how to target your complaints. See:


Whatever you decide to do about junk mail, remember that the practice of mailbombing (sending enormous files to the abuser in hopes of bringing down their server) is a crime in the United States. Not only that, many times, the return addressee is an innocent victim. Or, the Internet Service Provider has already cancelled the offender's account and you're only making matters worse.

Another option may be to write to your congresspersons to seek action. Several pieces of legislation are around that each deal with UCE in different ways. For more information, see CAUCE under "Other Resources."

What Does NERDC do to Block Spam?

NERDC's staff takes several steps, some more technical than others, to prevent most spam and UCE from entering its users' mailboxes. We'll only mention a few of NERDC's approaches to attaining a spam-free domain. Keep in mind that no single solution will keep away all spam and UCE.

First, NERDC does not allow e-mail from non-existent domains, meaning domain names that the Domain Name Server can't verify and match an Internet Protocol number. The message will bounce back to the sender.

Secondly, constant abusers, like CyberPromotions, are blocked—that is—their messages don't make it through. This includes both particularly abusive domains and addresses.

Next, if a spam message does make it through, our technical staff figures out (when possible) where the message originally came from and complains to the spammer's provider. These complaints usually get the spammer kicked off of the Internet.

If you are a campus network administrator and wish advice or assistance in dealing with spam on your own system, please feel free to contact NERDC's technical staff or e-mail consult@lists.ufl.edu [mailto:consult@lists.ufl.edu].

Other Resources:

The Coalition Against Unsolicited Commercial E-mail (CAUCE)

This non-profit organization works to lobby Congress against UCE. It has excellent information about bills currently in front of Congress.

*The Campaign to Stop Junk E-mail Web Site*

http://www.jcrdesign.com/junkemail.html

More information about legislation, and what you can do about junk e-mail. This site also includes a discussion of different tactics, including the step-by-step process referred to above.

*Junkbusters*

http://www.junkbusters.com/ How to get off lists, including snail mail. Getting the junk out of your life.

*Spams, Scams and Other Relevant Resources:*

http://www.macintouch.com/spam.shtml

A site hosted by Macintouch with links to other junk e-mail fighting sites.

**A Spam-free Future?**

Probably not. Even if legislation does pass the U.S. Congress, it only applies to junk e-mailers operating from the United States of America and cannot be enforced beyond this boundary. Some legislation currently in Congress is actually acceptable to some of the notorious spammers.

The best that users of the Internet can do is be informed, complain to the correct agencies, or just remain patient and liberal with their delete keys.

**Your Comments are Welcome**

We welcome your comments and suggestions on this and all UFIT documentation. Please send your comments to:

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