Spam: Lower your intake

Here are ways to help cut your diet of unwanted e-mail.

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You're anxiously awaiting an important e-mail from a patient or colleague. You click into your in box, only to find a string of solicitations urging you to refinance your mortgage, buy cheap Viagra, or get rich quick.

Meanwhile, that important message may have been bounced back to the sender and lost.

This is just one way electronic junk mail, or spam, wreaks havoc on millions of e-mail users. If you're tired of 'spammers' feeding you unwanted messages, read on.

WHY SPAM IS A PROBLEM

Mailing printed advertisements to 20 million people can cost tens of thousands of dollars in postage, mailing lists, and printing. By contrast, a spammer can reach that same audience for a fraction of the cost. Anyone with an Internet service provider (ISP) and a mass-mailing program can flood cyberspace with junk messages.

As a result, users waste precious time and money deleting junk messages by the score. Spam is especially costly to users who pay by the hour for dial-up Internet access.

What's more, ISPs need to purchase additional processing servers to handle the increase in e-mail volume caused by excessive junk messages. This often leads to rate increases for subscribers with DSL, cable-modem, or other broadband connections.

FIGHTING BACK

Federal lawmakers have begun taking aim at unwanted e-mails. The Can Spam Act of 2003, which awaits a Senate vote, would outlaw misleading advertising and mandate a range of requirements on e-solicitors, from inclusion of unsubscribe options on messages to use of functional return e-mail addresses. Violators would face fines of as much as $1 million and/or 1 year in prison.[1] Several states, such as Minnesota, also have been considering fines for junk e-mail.[2]

In the meantime, users can take measures—common-sense and technological—against spam.

FOLLOW THESE 4 STEPS

To keep your e-mail address out of spammers' hands, do not:

1. **Open spam messages.** Just as traditional junk mail is immediately discarded, spam should be deleted without opening. By clicking anywhere in the body of the junk e-mail, the sender receives a return message that e-mail access is valid, subjecting you to more spam.

2. **Click on the 'unsubscribe' link.** "Spammers" will not honor this request but will instead store your e-mail address for future reference. For similar reasons, do not reply to the e-mail.

   Some spammers post Web sites in which they promise to remove the user's name from spam lists. While some of

these sites are legitimate, many are just address collection sites.

3. **Post your e-mail address on a Web page.** Many spammers use programs that "harvest" e-mail addresses. These programs are particularly attracted to Web pages with hyperlinked e-mail addresses.

4. **Use an obvious address.** Some spammers use "dictionary spamming" by combining common last names and initials to find new e-mail targets. Try to include unusual numeral and character combinations in your address.

Also, use "jsluo|at|email.com" instead of jsluo@email.com. Replacing @ with |at| prevents mass-mailing programs from automatically harvesting and using that address. However, some novice users may not realize they need to type |at| instead of @ to contact you.

Finally, use an alternate e-mail address for contests and newsletters if you suspect these will open the floodgates for spam.

FIGHTING SPAM WITH TECHNOLOGY

Many free Web-based e-mail accounts such as Hotmail or Yahoo allow users to receive and delete e-mail in bulk by checking one box. Most providers also employ proprietary anti-spam software to protect their subscribers and servers.

E-mail clients such as Microsoft Outlook or Outlook Express allow you to set up rules to organize mail. Mail from certain users or with particular subjects can be automatically moved from the in box to designated folders. Messages containing terms such as 'mortgage' or 'improve your sex life' can be automatically deleted. Certain senders can be sent directly to the trash. Consult the "Help" section of these clients for directions.

Check your "deleted items" box to ensure that your rules are not sending important mail to the trash. Once you know that the rules work, you can automatically delete the files.

An anti-spam program can be added to your mail client (Table). These programs work via a combination of methods:

- The program checks a message's subject content and source to see if the address matches with a list of known spammers. Most spam has a characteristic style, format and phrasing that programs can spot.

- Users can "teach" the program which e-mails to block by verifying wanted and unwanted messages. Some programs send an e-mail to the sender requesting verification. Once the sender replies, mail will go through automatically.

But be careful. If you set your filter to get rid of any subject with 'urgent,' the filter may block a patient's urgent message.

BLOWING THE WHISTLE

You can also report a spammer to his or her ISP, which in turn may rescind the spammer's account or assess "cleanup fees."

Programs such as SpamCop and the Network Abuse Clearinghouse offer reporting/filtering programs that electronically forward spam complaints to ISPs and, in some cases, get a spammer's address blacklisted, meaning that the user can be denied Internet access through that ISP.

Senders who advertise fraudulent products can also be reported to the Federal Trade Commission. Those who advertise unapproved medical products can be reported to the Food and Drug Administration at (800) 532-4440.

Selected anti-spam programs

Program	URL	Clients	Cost
		Microsoft Outlook	

SpamBayes	http://spambayes.sourceforge.net/index.html	2000/XP	Free
spamassassin	http://www.spamassasin.org	Any POP clients	Free
SpamCop	http://www.spamcop.net	Reporting	Free
Network Abuse Clearinghouse	http://www.abuse.net	Reporting	Free
MailFrontier Matador	http://www.mailfrontier.com	Microsoft Outlook, Outlook Express	$29.95
Ella	http://www.openfieldsoftware.com/	Microsoft Outlook 2000/02, Outlook Express 5/6	$29.95
InBoxer	http://www.inboxer.com	Microsoft Outlook 2000/02/XP	$29.95
EmailProtect	http://www.contentwatch.com/email_protect/index.php	Any POP or IMAP e-mail client	$39.95
(STEVEN)	http://www.softwaredevelopment.net.au/pge_steven.htm	Any POP client, Microsoft Outlook and Outlook Express	Free and $29 registered versions
Vipul's Razor	http://razor.sourceforge.net/	Requires PERL, software agents	Free
SpamEater Pro	http://www.hms.com/spameater.asp	Any POP client	$24.95

Related Resources

Spam safety tips. http://www.spamfilterreview.com/spam-saftey-tips.html

Spam Tips and Help. http://spam.abuse.net/userhelp/

Mark R. Senate panel overwhelmingly passes anti-spam bill. dc.internet.com June 19, 2003. Available at: http://dc.internet.com/news/article.php/2224681. Accessed Sept. 5, 2003

Sturdevant C. Can-Spam Act can't. eWeek June 9, 2003. Available at: http://www.eweek.com/print_article/0,3668,a=43121,00.asp. Accessed Sept. 5, 2003

If you have any questions about these products or comments about Psyber Psychiatry, click here to contact Dr. Luo or send an e-mail to Current.Psychiatry@dowdenhealth.com.

Disclosure

Dr. Luo reports no financial relationship with any company whose products are mentioned in this article. The opinions expressed by Dr. Luo in this column are his own and do not necessarily reflect those of CURRENT PSYCHIATRY.

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2. Moylan MJ. Minnesota legislature considers fines for junk e-mail. *Siliconvalley.com.* Available at: http://www.siliconvalley.com/mld/siliconvalley/2751877.htm. Accessed Sept. 9, 2003.