

What to do with those pesky unwanted emails -SPAM

Introduction

Spam is a problem for individuals and companies impacting users on all platforms. In order to better understand what it is and how best to prevent it, I contacted my network of Computer Service companies and consultants. I've summarized their recommendations in this article.

Problem

Spam is probably one of the biggest threats and inconveniences there is today. It's causing numerous hours of non-productive work for all email users on all platforms. Individuals can experience a few to hundreds of unwanted email a day depending on their use of the internet. For a business spam can cause an increase in bandwidth use, eat up more disk space, and sometimes stop servers all together.

Even worse, spam can be an avenue for larger threats from Worms and Viruses, or a way of harvesting user identity information as with phishing. Phishing is a form of spam where the sender is looking for personal information, bank account numbers, social security numbers by way of an email with the look and feel of a bank or financial service. These types of invasive activities depend on the user to download an executable file, or click on a link to an imitation website where the credit card, social security number or pin numbers are requested.

Prevention

For individuals:

Prevention is the best way to reduce spam. In my survey of technology companies most recommended creating an address to use when purchasing a product or to be added to a newsletter. Yahoo, and hotmail offer free accounts that are good for this purpose. This keeps your routine email address private and not as accessible to spammers.

The second common recommendation was to look for spam in your email and delete it before opening it. If you use MS Outlook, turn off the view screen so the email isn't opened. Delete what you don't recognize and read the email from those you know. If you have an additional address, forward any questionable email to that address and deal with it there.

Never respond to a spammer's request to be deleted from a list unless you are certain the message comes from a legitimate source. This is a confirmation that the email address belongs to you and will make you an on-going target for future spam.

Don't ever give personal information in an email. If there is a request from the bank, call to verify the need. Look for the padlock in the lower right corner indicating a site is secure when providing credit cards.

Don't forward chain e-mail messages. Not only do you lose control over who sees your e-mail address, but you also may be furthering a hoax or aiding in the delivery of a virus.

The IT providers I surveyed recommend never to buy from a spammer, this only supports the process. Don't open attachments, and don't respond to an email even to delete your name from a list unless you are absolutely certain who has sent the email and that the source is legitimate.

For businesses:

Educate your employees about spam. Teach them the practices above and set policies around business uses of email accounts. Educated employees will do a lot to keep spam off the corporate network.

Your email hosting resource often will have spam filtering and sorting to reduce your unwanted email. If they don't, or if you host your own site, you can purchase a service, a hardware device, or use spam filtering software to reduce the frequency of the spam.

To date there is no way to prevent spam. The tools available are reactive and must look at the spam to identify it as spam. As many of these packages filter spam prior to the email getting to your server, space and bandwidth concerns are reduced. All programs have some amount of identifying legitimate email as spam, or letting some spam through, however. I have listed some of the more frequently recommended packages from those who responded to my survey on our website.

For additional product information:

<http://www.pcmag.com/category2/0,1738,4795,00.asp>

http://www.dcita.gov.au/ie/publications/2003/04/spam_report/filtering

<http://www.consumersearch.com/www/software/spam-filter-reviews/reviews.html>

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