

Aiming to stop spam

AS ANYONE WITH A computer and an email address is aware, what was once a trickle of unsolicited email has turned into a torrent:

- About 31 billion emails are sent daily; 25 billion emails are considered spam (slang for unsolicited commercial emails), and the number is rising as spammers find new ways to beat anti-spam software and solicit electronic sales.
- Spammers have software that "harvests" email addresses by sending millions of random emails to determine if anyone is at the other end.
- Spam is considered the number one workplace irritant. It costs the public and private sectors millions in lost productivity and frustrates employees. Industry Canada reported in September 2004 that it receives four million spam emails every month. As well as lost productivity, Industry Canada estimates spam will add \$560,000 this year to the department's server processing costs.

Internet service providers (ISPs) and major carriers – such as San Francisco-headquartered Brightmail Inc., whose software is installed around the world – are united in their estimates that about eight of every ten emails is spam.

Not just junk mail

Spam emails can carry viruses, invasive worms and Trojan horses – all destructive programs designed to infiltrate servers and computers that may lead to system crashes and data loss. Viruses and worms replicate themselves quickly and use all available memory. Trojan horses are more dangerous. They transmit themselves across networks, bypassing security systems and act as a gateway to introduce viruses onto a computer. Even benign viruses can create problems by taking up computer memory. As a result, they often cause erratic behaviour and can result in system crashes.

Dealing with spam

Industry Canada has proposed a three-tiered solution, which includes anti-spam hardware and software. The Government of Canada has established a panel of experts to devise a national anti-spam plan, which could include new laws to prosecute spammers.

There are things you can do. Never buy from a spammer. Never open spam. Never unsubscribe to unsolicited email. Doing so sends a message to the spammer that you are there. Delete the email immediately.

Be cautious with your email address. Treat it with confidentiality, like your home phone number. Have more than one email address. Use a separate address for friends and relatives.

Hundreds of firewall and anti-spam software programs are available, all of which guarantee a degree of protection. There is no one-size-fits-all solution. For absolute efficiency an anti-spam program must be tailored to the end-user's requirements.



Every ISP has an efficient spam filter that will deny specific addresses and which has the capability to block emails containing offensive words. Other filters have adjustable settings that apply numerous tests to determine if a message is spam. The tests include a series of capitalized words, excessive use of exclamation marks and specific phrases such as: "Lose Weight Now; Enlarging It; Stop Spam." These remedies are generally not successful in the workplace where businesses and government employees deal with a broad range of inquiries. Blocking seemingly offensive words can prevent otherwise legitimate email reaching the recipient.

Anti-spam vendors

Software developers have been actively pursuing anti-spam solutions. Anti-spam software includes: Brightmail (a Symantec company), Vircom (ModusGate), AmikaNow! (an Entrust company), Roaring Penguin, Message Labs, BorderWare, CipherTrust, McAfee Security and newer vendors such as Sensible Security Solutions (SSS) in Ottawa. SSS offers a storehouse for 30 anti-spam software programs and will determine the most effective program for functionality and efficiency according to client's email requirements. AmikaNow!, also in Ottawa, offers Amika-Guardian software that catches spam by 'reading' emails to get a feel for content and innuendos and by not applying keyword detection that might possibly catch mail containing words such as 'breast', which could refer to breast cancer. ♪

Web sources

- ChoiceMail – Permission-based spam blocker customized to the recipient's requirements. Permission-based means ChoiceMail assumes email is spam unless it knows otherwise. (www.digiportal.com)
- GFI – Leading worldwide developer of messaging, content security and network security software for Windows NT/2000/2003/XP administrators. Product range includes server software, email content/exploit checking and anti-virus and server-based anti-spam software. (www.gfi.com)
- Hexamail – Hexamail Enterprise solutions automate, streamline and simplify the messaging needs for global enterprises. Software prevents security intrusions and attacks, routes incoming emails intelligently, ensures compliance with the latest email legislation, and reduces liability by monitoring outgoing emails. (www.hexamail.com)

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