

Learn-IT Newsletter for the month of June, 2005

Add 108 Days to Your Life – Go on a Spam Diet Today!

by Mark Flores, MCP, MCSE

“Well, there's egg and bacon; egg sausage and bacon; egg and spam; egg bacon and spam; egg bacon sausage and spam; spam bacon sausage and spam; spam egg spam spam bacon and spam; spam sausage spam spam bacon spam tomato and spam”

The couple in the classic Monty Python skit just wanted a simple breakfast, but found out that they couldn't place an order without also getting an unwanted extra side dish – SPAM. Many computer users feel that they can't open their e-mail boxes without having to sort through a similar type of unwanted material; which is where the term for junk e-mail originates. Assuming that you get 10 unwanted e-mails per day, and it takes you about 5 seconds to read/delete each one. In 30 years, you will have wasted over 108 days of your life reading this junk. How can you get back those precious days?

Here are 3 things that you can do to minimize the amount of unsolicited e-mail you receive:

1. **Only give your e-mail address to people or business relations that you personally know.** Although this advice may come too late for some, the most reliable way of avoiding spam is to not be a target in the first place. Get a free “junk” e-mail account from a service such as Yahoo! or Hotmail. Whenever you need to provide an e-mail address on a web site form, or from someone that you don't know that well, use this junk address. You can still check it from time to time, but there will never be any important e-mail sent to this address. (I have had the same personal e-mail address for several years and only receive 1-2 unsolicited e-mails per week!) If you can start over with a new e-mail address, do so and open a junk e-mail account as well.
2. **Invest in SPAM-blocking software.** If you are already a regular target of SPAM and do not wish to forfeit your e-mail address, your battle will be more difficult. There are companies and coalitions who regularly collect the names of known ‘spammers’ and keep them in a database, often called a ‘black hole list’. These companies sell software that will process your e-mail, check it against their database and remove the unwanted e-mail before it reaches your inbox. Depending on where your e-mail is processed (at your company or at the ISP), the configuration of this software can be tricky.
3. **Set up a filter in your e-mail software application.** E-mail programs such as Outlook have the ability to filter out unwanted e-mail by keyword or recipient, but it does not block them, it just moves them directly into the deleted items folder. The chance you take when blocking or filtering your e-mail is that you may accidentally miss something important that wasn't supposed to be deleted or blocked.

Here are a couple of important rules to help keep you SPAM-free:

- If the unsolicited e-mail has a line at the end similar to “if you do not wish to receive these e-mails in the future, reply to this e-mail” – DO NOT REPLY! This is the way that spammers verify that your e-mail address is valid. Once you have replied, they have a valuable piece of information that can be sold to thousands of other spammers.
- When filling out a web-based form, many times there is a “check here to receive periodic updates via e-mail” option, conveniently pre-checked for you. Uncheck it – if you need some information about them in the future, you already know how to find them.

Relevant Terminology

Header – The header of an e-mail contains the name of the recipient(s), sender and subject. While viewing an e-mail in Outlook, you can click on View | Message Header to toggle this on and off. Hidden within the e-mail is the complete header which traces the e-mail back to its origin. You can see the original header while reading an e-mail in Outlook by clicking on View | Options.

Spoofing – Tracking an unwanted e-mail back to its source is often difficult because most spammers deliberately hide their identities or cover their trails by disguising their computer's internet address. This technique is called ‘spoofing’.

Aliasing – Although this term does sound sinister, it isn't. If your e-mail address is jdoe@zzz.com, but would also like to receive e-mail as john@zzz.com and johnd@zzz.com, your ISP can create 'aliases' of your username that automatically get sent to your main e-mail account. Aliases are also handy when you are the HR manager, for example, but don't want everyone to know your internal e-mail address. Instead, you could receive e-mail under the alias of hr@zzz.com.

For more information about SPAM-blocking software, browse to the following Yahoo! category and check out the popular web sites available:

Home > Business and Economy > Business to Business > Computers > Communications and Networking > Software
> Email > Junk Email Removal

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