

The Trouble With Spam

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If you have an email address, then you have seen the problem. Spam: zillions of email messages offering to sell you everything from home-remedies to get-rich-quick schemes and even lists of email addresses that you can send your own messages to!

You may have been tempted to purchase a list to send out your own messages. After all, the people who sell the list insist that it's a "clean" list, and that all the email addresses are "qualified" and "opt-in" and "not spam", so what could possibly be wrong with that?

The purpose of this article is to explain why there is no such thing as a legitimate list of email addresses that you can purchase for bulk email, and why sending bulk email to anyone who hasn't asked for it will always get you in trouble.

WHAT IS SPAM?

With apologies to Hormel, in this context the term "spam" does not refer to their canned meat product. In this context, the term "spam" refers to Unsolicited Bulk Email (or UBE). Any electronic message sent to addresses whose owners have not specifically requested it is spam. For the most part, the term refers to messages sent in bulk, but reasons that will become clear my definition includes "personalized" messages sent one-by-one.

Sometimes you may see the term UCE, or Unsolicited Commercial Email. I don't use that term because some people use it to justify sending spam that they may categorize as non-commercial, such as solicitations for charitable contributions.

Because email can be sent in large quantities with relatively little cost or effort, it can appear to be a very attractive advertising medium. Beginning soon after the first generally available Internet connections opened in 1989, opportunists of all types began using email as a medium for advertising.

WHAT IS THE HARM OF SPAM?

Over the years the amount of spam has become so great that the major Internet Service Providers (ISPs) report that 25–30% of their bandwidth is used by spam. This

represents the use of tremendous resources, without authorization or compensation, at a significant cost to the Internet community at large.

In the case of postal bulk-mail advertisements, the advertiser pays for the cost of the paper, ink, printing, the labor of stuffing the envelopes and ultimately even the postage used to send the advertisement.

In the case of email spam, everyone *but* the advertiser pays the costs involved.

Because the sender knows that their account will be canceled as soon as their ISP finds out that it was used to send spam, most spam is sent from free trial accounts at no cost to the sender.

Because most ISPs have automatic limits imposed to prevent the abuse of their systems, most spammers “bounce” their messages off insecure foreign systems, effectively stealing computer time and bandwidth without the knowledge of the system’s owner.

Because there is no effective way to filter out incoming spam before it is received by the servers at your local ISP, the ISP must pay for the bandwidth of the messages they receive; even if they filter them out and delete them before they get to your inbox.

As a result, we all pay more for our Internet services than we would if there was no spam.

DO CUSTOMERS RESPOND TO SPAM?

In one recent survey, over 95% of respondents said they were annoyed or extremely annoyed by spam. Less than 4% had ever responded to a spam message, and over 90% of those responses were complaints.

Those who sell spamming services would tell you that even a fraction of a percent response to 50 million messages would generate significant sales. Keep in mind that the number of complaints will outweigh the number of positive responses by well over 10 to 1. In all likelihood your ISP would cancel your account and your web site would be shut down.

The only ones actually making any money off spam are the services that send the messages. That’s why so many of the spam messages you receive are advertisements for those services.

WHAT ABOUT “CLEAN” AND “OPT-IN” LISTS?

If someone is offering to sell or rent a list of email addresses to you, you need to know about the trouble you are potentially getting into.

In most cases, the addresses on the list were culled off the Internet: from web sites, discussion forums, domain registration records, and other places where the owners of the addresses did not intend for them to be used in this way. Keep in mind, the spammers sent you a solicitation and you didn't ask for it, so at least some of the addresses didn't opt in. It is likely that all the addresses came from a source similar to where they got yours.

Even in the unlikely event that some or all of the addresses had given permission to receive promotional email, many of them will still complain to your ISP because they did not ask for email from *you*. You will be held responsible for the spam that you send, or that is sent in your behalf. You will probably lose your Internet connection and your web site. It's just not worth the risk.

WHAT IF I WRITE THE MESSAGES INDIVIDUALLY?

The issue is not whether the messages are sent entirely without human intervention, the issue is that people did not ask for it. The Internet community is *very* sensitive to the issue of spam. Even if you just send a few messages you are likely to get complaints, and most ISPs have no tolerance for spam complaints. The outside chance that you may get a little business for your effort is not worth the risk.

IF SPAM IS SO BAD, WHY DO PEOPLE SEND IT?

If spam were a viable and economical way to reach customers, it stands to reason that major successful businesses would use it. Let's take a look at the spam in my inbox today and see who's selling what.

So far today I have received spam on the following subjects: Get-rich-quick schemes; Adult web sites; Under-the-counter medications; Piracy software; Casino software; Spying/Anti-spying software; and Spamming services. Even if we ignore the fact that most of those messages are selling illegal or otherwise illegitimate products, these are all businesses of desperation and opportunism.

Why don't we get any spam from Fortune 500 companies? Because it doesn't generate sales, only complaints. On the other hand, major Fortune 500 businesses *do* use email to create and maintain customer loyalty. How do they do it?


RESPONSIBLE EMAIL MARKETING

All commercial email is not spam. In fact, most of us who have ever done any business on the Internet regularly receive *and read* commercial email messages. They're called *newsletters* and your customers will even ask for them.

It works like this: you put a box on your web site (like those at the right) where you offer your visitors an opportunity to subscribe to your newsletter so they can learn about the latest news and/or deals from your company. Then a service (such as WebMonster Networks <http://email.webbie.net/>) will collect those addresses into a database that is automatically maintained for you. Whenever you want to send a message to your customers (weekly or monthly) you either use a web page to post your message or send it via email to a special address. Then the newsletter service provider automatically sends your message to all the people who have asked for it!

Using email responsibly will help you to maintain brand loyalty and keep your customers aware of your business. You can even use your newsletter to send out special offers when you need a quick boost in sales.

Email newsletters are an effective and inexpensive way to keep your business in front of your market. Your customers will look forward to hearing from you periodically, and you will look forward to the boost in traffic that you get every time you send out a newsletter.



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