

The Spam Dilemma

We have all had this experience. You log into your email account and discover that you have some new messages. Fervent with anticipation, you open your inbox, only to find nothing but solicitations and spam. Most of the spam that I get in my inbox is abhorrent, but I still like to look at it because some of it is quite entertaining. My favorites include subjects such as 95% discounts on Canadian Viagra, quotes for 80 year mortgages, and ads for practically every sort of pornographic web site on the net. Those of you familiar with spam have probably noticed that the name of the sender that appears next to the message subject is usually either a strange email address or a bizarre name. Spammers do this because obviously they do not want to reveal their real email address or name. They have developed programs that can actually mutate their email address so that the recipient will not be able to track where the email came from. So, how did these freaks get your email address in the first place? One of the ways is through opt-in email. At one time or another, we have all subscribed to or ordered something online. In doing so, as part of the subscription or service that you signed up for, you may have inadvertently or unknowingly agreed to receive offers via email from that company in the future. As a result, they begin to send you email. This is legal as long as the company provides you with a way to unsubscribe from their mailing list. However, the most nefarious email marketers do not provide you with a way to be removed from their mailing list. To make matters worse, they will often sell your email address and any other information you submitted to them to hundreds of other companies who are looking for mailing lists. Before you know it, your email address has been circulated far and wide to almost every online business imaginable. There are other methods that spammers will employ to get their grimy hands on your email address. Sometimes what they do is once they have purchased a list of email addresses from someone else, they will then send a joke or an interesting cartoon to everyone on the list and ask that you forward it along to all your friends and relatives. Once you forward the message, the spammer actually has a program that can copy the list of addresses that the message has been forwarded to and send it back to him or her. So now, that person not only has your email address, but also has the email address of every one of your friends and relatives. Using this tactic, clever email marketers can grow their list exponentially. Another popular technique is something called harvesting. Harvesting is quickly becoming the most powerful, sophisticated, and most useful method for grabbing thousands or even millions of email addresses almost instantaneously. This is accomplished by writing a simple software program that searches through every web site listed on a search engine for a certain keyword, and then quickly scanning through each web site and copying any and all email addresses that are posted there and then sending them back to the spammer. An example of harvesting would be a program written to scan every website listed on Google for a certain keyword, such as mortgage brokers, and then copying every email address that is found on the various web sites that come up in the search, and emailing the entire list back to the person doing the harvesting. In this manner, a person could build a list containing thousands of email addresses of mortgage brokers in less than an hour. Harvesting has become a legal quandary, because spammers feel that it is permissible to harvest email addresses that are posted on public websites because, in their opinion, if someone has posted their email address for all to see, then other people have the right to contact that person and ask them questions or send them offers. However, web sites where email addresses are posted have struck back with threats of legal action against anyone that copies addresses and uses them for the purpose of building mailing lists or sending marketing offers. Unfortunately, these web sites really have no way to block this email theft, and it is becoming more rampant every day. Spamming and email marketing is here to stay, as it is nearly impossible to regulate or prohibit. Both big businesses and small businesses have a strong incentive to send bulk email, because it does not cost anything, and helps them increase their business. Sending regular mail or hiring telemarketers is infinitely more costly. Also, people tend to discard solicitations sent to them in the regular mail very quickly, and telemarketers are usually hung up on. As a result, most companies favor sending massive amounts of email versus direct mail or cold calling. So, you should not expect your inbox to be any less crammed with spam anytime soon.

About the Author

Jim Pretin is the owner of <http://www.forms4free.com>, a service that helps programmers make email forms.

Source: <http://americanahost.com>