

How to deal with spam

Article Source: CVC Circuit Riders Date: May 2008

More and more frequently I get asked by clients what they can do about the amount of spam they are receiving. To know the answer, we need to understand a little about what spam is, why we get it and things we can do to minimise or eradicate it.

What is spam?

Spam is any email sent to you from someone you don't know or email that you didn't specifically request. If you signed up to a mailing list or ticked a box on a company's website granting them permission to send you email about occasional offers which you simply no longer wish to receive, that is not spam - you requested it.

Why does spam exist?

It is currently estimated that around 80-90% of all email on the Internet is spam, and it is continuing to rise. Why does spam exist? Simple - money. Sending out a conventional postal mailing (junk mail) costs money whereas a spammer can send 1 million, or even 10 or 100 million spam instantaneously and for free. If only 0.1% of people fall for it or make a purchase as a result, then the spammers will make a LOT of money - you do the maths! If people didn't fall for it, then they wouldn't do it, it's as simple as that.

Where did they get my email address?

There are a large number of ways your email address can end up in the hands of spammers. Here are just a few:

- You used your email address when purchasing something on the Internet and it was sold on
- You used your email address to sign up or register for something on the Internet and it was sold on
- You published it on your website or use it to post to public mailing lists or discussion forums
- A friend or colleague has it in their address book and had it stolen by a virus
- They randomly guessed it

What can I do?

What can you do if you already receive lots of spam on a daily basis? There are a few things you can do as an end user, but none of them are particularly effective. Nevertheless, here's a list:

- Email addresses are disposable, so dump it and start again with a fresh one
- Most email software has spam filtering - make sure it's turned on
- Check to see if your email provider offers any spam filtering

Throwing away your current (spammed) email address works great, but it's not very convenient. I've had to change my email address a number of times when changing employers or ISP's, and trying to persuade friends and colleagues to update their records is a pain, not to mention all the services you may have signed up for using your old email address.

Most modern email software includes some kind of spam filtering but it's not ideal and is definitely not intended to deal with huge amounts of spam, rather just the occasional message. The other problem is that it's not always reliable so you still end up checking through the spam just in case any legitimate messages ended up in there by mistake. It's far better to just not get the spam in the first place. Many email providers will offer spam filtering, some as part of the service and others for an additional charge. However, not all spam filtering is equal and some works far better than others - the trouble is you are limited to what your provider may or may not offer. This is by far the most effective way to deal with spam but is not within your control.

What else can I do to minimise the amount of spam I get?

If you are lucky enough to start with a clean email address then there are a number of simple steps you can take to keep it that way and ensure your email address stays out of the hands of the spammers. However, just as important as what you can do is what you shouldn't do.

- Don't choose an easy to guess email username in your email address (e.g. bob@hotmail.com)
- Don't publish your email address on your website, or if you do, obfuscate it
- Use multiple email addresses, one for work and another throwaway account for signing up to things
- Don't respond to spam. Don't even read it, just delete it
- Don't ever click on unsubscribe or remove links

If you have a really common email address, say bob@hotmail.com then it is pretty easy for spammers to guess it - all

they really need to do is put common first names in front of any common domain and they've got your email address. Using something like robert.jones@hotmail.com is going to be harder to guess and robert.jones1968@hotmail.com is even better. Obviously there is a tradeoff here between something that's easy to remember and something that's hard for the spammers to randomly guess, but you get the idea.

Another way spammers obtain your email address is by harvesting it from your website if you have published it on your contact page. If you must put your email address on your website, then obfuscate it so that the spammers' automated software can't harvest it. There are a number of ways you can do this, for example by making it part of an image rather than being in plain text, or encoding it as escaped hexadecimal or with javascript. If you don't understand any of that, speak to your website designer for more information.

Using multiple email addresses for different things is another great way to minimise the amount of spam you get. Keep your preferred email address for friend, family and colleagues only and use disposable email addresses for other more risky activities, and then just throw them away and get another when they start receiving too much spam.

Responding to spam or clicking on unsubscribe or remove links is about the worst thing you can possibly do. Spammers place a real premium on confirmed live email accounts where the spam actually gets through to the victim. By responding or clicking an unsubscribe or remove link you have just:

- confirmed your email address is live
- confirmed that you don't have spam filtering
- confirmed that you actually open and read spam message
- confirmed that you follow instructions contained in spam messages

That makes you about as good as it can possibly get for a spammer and he's going to send you everything he's got plus sell your address to every other spammer he knows. You're a little gold mine for him and the perfect candidate for plenty more spam!

There has to be a better way

If after reading all that you are thinking it all sounds a bit hit and miss, and that there has to be a better way, then you are absolutely correct.

As an end user, other than taking sensible precautions as described above, there is little you can do if you are already receiving lots of spam. The answer is with your email provider.