Crabby's top 10 spam-fighting tips

Applies to: Microsoft Office Outlook 2003

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Crabby Office Lady

If you have an e-mail address, it's just about impossible for you to eliminate spam completely. However, there are steps you can take to reduce that pesky, unsolicited commercial e-mail. Here are my 10 favorite methods for hitting spam where it hurts.

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"**Spam**": The word alone strikes terror in the hearts of e-mail users (although not necessarily in lovers of the processed pork luncheon meat by the same name, and to which this columnist bears no ill will). It has no manners, knows no boundaries, and takes no prisoners. It makes you wring your hands in frustration, shake your fist with rage, and wear out your DELETE key and finger.

What is spam?

No one I talked to is really sure what the letters in "spam" stand for:

- spam: Stupid Pointless Annoying Mail?
- spam: Stymieing Practice of Altering Minds?
- spam: Scrambled Pieces of Asinine Marketing?

Actually, it stands for nothing — it's just unsolicited e-mail (commercial or otherwise) that comes to your Inbox in droves. How it was named "spam" is debated in countless newsgroups and Web sites on that oracle of misinformation we call the Internet. In other words, no one is really sure. (Yes, folks, I'm aware of the Monty Python skit but the connection between that and e-mail seems rather coincidental. Who was using e-mail then?).

How can I avoid spam?

While you can spend lots of your hard-earned cash on spam blockers, spam butchers, spam SWAT teams, spam sharpshooters, and spam spammers, you can also take a few steps yourself to reduce your daily spam rations. Ready? Let's get crackin'.

Method #1: Use Outlook to manage junk e-mailers

Now that you have Outlook 2003 on your desktop (and if you don't, what I'm about to lay out for you might just get you on your feet, out the door, and off to get it), you may have noticed a folder called Junk E-Mail. (No, we didn't prepopulate it for you with spam.)

This new folder is the embodiment of the Junk E-mail Filter — soon to be your new best friend. This filter basically scans messages before they get to your Inbox and annoy you. It decides whether a message is junk based on several factors, including the time of day it was sent and the content of the message. While the filter doesn't initially single out any particular sender or type of message, here are a few steps you can take to customize this filter to be your very spam bodyguard:

- You can add message senders to the Safe Senders List so that their messages will never be treated as junk e-mail.
- Contacts are automatically trusted by default, so messages from people in your Contacts folder will also never be treated as junk e-mail.

- You can configure Outlook to only accept messages from the Safe Senders List, giving you total control over which messages reach your Inbox.
- Conversely, you can easily block messages from a certain e-mail address or domain name by adding the sender to the Blocked Senders List.
- If you belong to a mailing list, you can add the address for the list to your Safe Recipients List so that messages sent to the mailing list will not be treated as junk e-mail.
- If you are using a Microsoft Exchange Server e-mail account, messages from within your organization will never be treated as junk e-mail, regardless of the content of the message. (I live in such a world, and I want to take this opportunity to thank all my coworkers and higher-ups for their warm regards, pointed remarks, and misplaced aggression.)

By default, the Junk E-mail Filter is set to a low setting that is designed to catch the most obvious junk e-mail. Any message that is caught by the filter is moved to a special Junk E-mail folder, where you can retrieve or review it at a later time.

If you don't have Outlook 2003 installed yet, here are two solutions in the interim (the very *short* interim) for previous versions of Outlook or Microsoft Outlook Express:

- Add senders to the junk e-mail list. You can add whole domains this way, too.
- Create rules that can recognize spam, such as a rule that flags or deletes e-mail messages with certain words in the subject line or body of the message.

You can also create rules to color-code these messages (instead of deleting them automatically), so that they're easily recognizable in the Inbox. That way, if your Great-aunt Bessie sends you e-mail that for some reason has the words "HOT HOT HOT" in the subject line (one can only speculate why: pies? Great-uncle Sol? Vinyl seats in the Buick?), it won't get deleted until you see it first.

To learn how to add senders to the junk mail list or how to create rules, press F1 for Help in Outlook 2002, Outlook 2000, or Outlook Express.

Method #2: Avoid replying to the sender

When you reply and type REMOVE in the subject line, this is a great way to let spammers know that yes, your e-mail address is up, running, and being used right now. It's like waving a white flag that says, "I read unsolicited e-mail. Please send more."

The best way to "opt out" of a spammer's mailing list is to pretend you never received the e-mail message. Put your hands over your ears and sing, "La-la-la-la...I can't HEAR you!" (No one likes to be ignored.)

Method #3: Alter your e-mail address when you post it

You might post your e-mail address sometimes to a newsgroup, chat room, or bulletin board. But you don't have to post it correctly. The funky term for this is "munging" your address. This means adding a character, number, or symbol (or two) that has to be taken out for your address to work (for example, "cr@bby@mi(rosft.com"). It really throws those automatic "address harvesters" (yikes, what a term!) off balance, and they just slink away from whence they came.

Method #4: Don't give out your primary e-mail address

Create a "disposable" Web e-mail address (such as one from an MSN® Hotmail® account) that you can give when registering for free software or shareware, or even when ordering from a company online. In fact, Hotmail can help you avoid getting spam. I like to give my primary address to friends and family, and then I have another one I use when I'm ordering some new rhinestone glasses or hair coloring.

Method #5: Make use of laws against spam

The CAN-SPAM Act of 2003 was approved by the Senate in November 2003 and by the House of Representatives in December 2003, and was signed into law by President Bush on December 16, 2003.

For more information about spam laws that have been enacted and those still waiting around patiently, visit the Spam Laws Web site.

Method #6: Don't post your address on your Web page

Again, you can munge it or not post it there at all. Then those nasty spam weevils can't find you.

Method #7: Review Web sites' privacy policies

I know that you're an Internet expert and that you can blaze through those online forms at lightning speed. But slow down, Cha-Cha, and make sure that you're checking all the privacy options you need to check. Sometimes these are hard to find, but they're there. And sometimes there is more than one box to check. Some sites assume the right to share your information; responsible sites will give you a way to opt out.

An example:

Let's say that you're in the process of purchasing a fabulous new pair of rhinestone glasses. You've filled out all the pertinent information: Size, style, shipping and billing info, and an e-mail address to receive the order confirmation. Now before you click the "place order" button, look around.

Are there any check boxes or tiny form fields on that page that are checked to indicate that you're fine with this company selling or giving away your e-mail address to "responsible" parties? Make sure you uncheck (or check, whichever the case may be) where necessary. In fact, backtrack through the pages and make sure you didn't forget to indicate your "don't-you-dare-sell-this-e-mail-address" preference.

And here is a tip:

Even if you did all the right things and found all the sneaky little boxes, make sure you check those boxes again if, for some reason, you have to backtrack through the form. Sometimes sneaky vendors will set the pages to go back to the default setting, thereby tripping you up again. Good grief, it takes such vigilance, doesn't it? (Yes, but it's worth it.)

Method #8: Don't list yourself in Internet directories

This is a tough one. If you're in the regular phone book, chances are you're in one of the big directories such as BigFoot, AnyWho, InfoSpace, Switchboard, and Yahoo!. Look yourself up, and there you'll be. There is probably a place to add your e-mail address (for free, can you believe it?), but my advice is: Don't.

Method #9: Ditch that clever profile

From an informal poll I took among friends, they told me that after they cleared their profile from a certain Internet service provider (that shall not be named), the amount of spam they received was drastically reduced.

Method #10: Do not forward chain e-mail

This is my favorite one, and I'm pretty sure I've lost some friends after telling them to cease and desist. Here's a good example:

- *On NPR's Morning Edition last week, Nina Tottenberg said that if the Supreme Court supports Congress, it is in effect the end of the National Public Radio (NPR), NEA & the Public Broadcasting System (PBS)...."*

Sound familiar? This is a hoax. Don't forward it to friends. Your first clue is that Nina's last name is misspelled. Not familiar? You don't listen to public radio? OK, here is one for you:

- *My name is Bill Gates, and I need your help...*

It's a pretty good bet that if you don't know Bill Gates, he won't be sending you any sort of e-mail, because chances are he doesn't need your help. He's never even sent me e-mail. (I'm still waiting. I still have hope.)

Some others I've received concern needles in theater seats, free software from my boss, free cases of champagne, free trips to Disney World, a request for money for a little girl dying of a tropical disease, the Hawaiian good luck totem, caution using cell phones at gas stations, and my personal favorite: a virus warning about e-mail messages with "How to give a cat a colonic" in the subject line.

"The best lightning rod for your protection is your own spine." — Ralph Waldo Emerson

About the author

Annik Stahl, the Crabby Office Lady columnist, takes all of your complaints, compliments, and knee-jerk reactions to heart. Therefore, she graciously asks that you let her know whether this column was useful to you — or not — by entering your feedback using the **Did this article help you?** feedback tool below. And remember: If you don't vote, you can't complain.

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