

Information Technology

From Luncheon Meat to Internet Scourge

[Spammers] are the mutant spawn of a bizarre reproductive act involving a telemarketer, Larry Flynt, a tapeworm, and an executive of the Third Class mail industry. -- Dave Barry

In 2003, several Internet Service Providers reported that, for the first time, the volume of unsolicited e-mail (spam) passing through their servers exceeded the volume of legitimate e-mail.

Ah, the good old days of e-mail – from people you knew, relevant to you or your business, and good for an occasional chuckle. Now you feel like covering your eyes when opening your e-mail. Will this flood of scams, pitches for loans and online drugs and porn ever stop?

You can reduce spam with some ideas described later, but the real solution is legal. Some states have passed laws to eliminate spam, but enforcing them, especially against foreign companies, is difficult. In 2004, Congress passed the CAN-SPAM Act with great fanfare, but most experts regard it as favoring e-mailers over consumers. One wag pointed out that it's aptly named – they can spam us. (For more information on legislation, see the August, 2003 issues of Consumer Reports and PC World or www.cauce.org. CAUCE – the Coalition against Unsolicited Commercial E-mail is a group seeking effective legislation. Other organizations are www.spam.abuse.net, and the Network Abuse Clearinghouse: www.abuse.net.)

Until Congress gets it together, here are some things you can do to reduce (minimize is probably unreachable) spam:

- Get a Hotmail or Yahoo address to use in newsgroups or when you sign up for e-mail newsletters. Don't make it easily guessed, like "jane123".
- Turn on spam-blockers offered by your Internet provider. All the majors have them.
- Several products claiming to reduce spam are on the market. Check recent reviews in the magazines before spending money.
- Turn on filtering in your e-mail program. In Outlook and Outlook Express, go to Tools, Message Rules. You can delete e-mail containing specific words or phrases in the subject line, although alterations like "viag*ra" will slip through.
- Don't reply to spam; this just confirms that your e-mail address is valid
- Report spam to your Internet service provider and the FTC.
- Support the organizations listed above; write to Congress.

Spiced ham sandwich, anyone?

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