

If you wanted to know...

How to Fight Spam

... Read on ...

What did you get in your e-mail today?

Mixed in with messages from friends or business associates, many people receive numerous unsolicited sales pitches or marketing promotions, some of which are connected to elaborate cons or X-rated services.

Depending on who in the family gets to the computer first, some of this *spam* — as junk e-mail is known — may also have been read by children.

And, in effect, you have helped pay for material you didn't want sent to you. When someone wants to send thousands of commercial messages by regular or "snail" mail, he or she has to pay for the paper, the envelopes and either the stamps or a commercial delivery service. When sending messages by e-mail, virtually all the cost is borne by the recipients, through their hourly or monthly Internet connection fee, and by the Internet companies that handle this spam.

The Information and Privacy Commissioner/Ontario has received a number of queries about how to block spam. While it is quite difficult to block out every piece of junk e-mail without eliminating some of the e-mail you actually may want to read, there are several measures you can take to significantly reduce the volume.

First, let's look at the overall problem.

The Problem

Spam has become such an issue that it has attracted critical comment from divergent sources ranging from leading Canadian Internet providers, the U.S.

Federal Trade Commission (which held hearings last year into Internet direct marketing), and the editorial boards of prominent newspapers, to Bill Gates, chairman and CEO of Microsoft.

In a recent column, Gates said spam (or UCE, unsolicited commercial e-mail) wasted people's time, which "strikes me as the height of rudeness.... That's what makes electronic junk mail and e-mail hoaxes so maddening. The "free" distribution of unwelcome or misleading messages to thousands of people is an annoying and sometimes destructive use of the Internet's unprecedented efficiency."

Gates, whose own company offers regular e-mail mailings to customers and potential customers, is quick to point out that mass mailings of e-mails of a commercial nature are legitimate if the recipients invited the communication by signing up for "news" on certain topics or for offers of a particular kind.

Choice is what it's all about — privacy revolves around one's ability to make choices relating to the uses of one's personal information (in this case, the use of your e-mail address). Spam, however, rarely involves choice — it is unsolicited and usually unwelcome commercial e-mail. Even more infuriating is that most "spammers" ignore requests from individuals to be dropped from their mailing lists.

Reining in Spam

Here are some steps that you can take to reduce the flow of spam:

- Before registering at a website, check its privacy policy to see if and how the company plans to use





your information, including your e-mail address. It could end up on a marketing list sold to various spammers.

- Consider having your name deleted from your online service's members' directory.
- Many spammers ask you to reply if you want to be taken off their list. Don't reply! Spammers interpret this as a positive sign that the spam is actually being read and you may get buried in even more spam.
- Most ISPs have a procedure or a mail-blocking policy for dealing with spam. Contact your ISP to learn what your options are.
- Consider de-registering from any mailing lists or listservs you are listed under (although this may not be practical if you chose to sign up for them). Alternatively, establish a second Internet account that you never use for chat rooms, public postings or subscriptions. This way, you can keep spam out of your main e-mail account.

Filters

There are a number of filtering programs that can help to reduce the flow of spam. Some e-mail programs already have a built-in filtering tool. If you're not sure how to trigger yours, or aren't sure of all the implications (no filter is perfect), ask your ISP or the help desk of the company that provided your e-mail program.

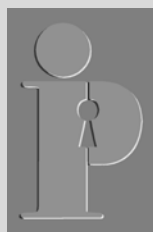
There are two basic ways to set up a filter. You can instruct it to only accept e-mail from a specific list of users or services, or to weed out specific users or services. Depending on the filter, you may also be able to set different filter levels for each member of the family who has a listed screen name — including sharply limiting, if desired, e-mail sent to a young child. For example, America Online has a filter system called Mail Controls that can be set separately for each screen name.

Anti-Spam Tools

There are a variety of websites offering tips or other information on blocking spam, many of which provide links to other such sites. Here are a few to choose from:

- <http://www.usatoday.com/life/cyber/tech/ctb562.htm>
- <http://cnet.com/Content/Features/Howto/Stop/>
- <http://www.sanfranciscobay.com/dirty/anti-spam.htm>
- <http://web.singnet.com.sg/~angel13/spam.html>

The Internet is a great communications tool and a valuable medium for businesses. Reputable businesses (as opposed to unethical spammers), however, will honour a request to have an address, electronic or otherwise, deleted from a mailing list. Make your wishes known — it's up to you to tell them.



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If you have any comments regarding this publication, wish to advise of a change of address, or be added to the mailing list, please contact:

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