

## Business Plus Article – April 2004 Spam

There are few things I love more than paying someone to look out the window and tell me what the weather is like. Of course I jest; but when a government survey recently reported spam was beginning to inconvenience British businesses, my initial reaction was “tell me something I don’t know!”

By now, we all know what spam is. Broadly speaking; spam is unsolicited email often promoting products or services. How it became known as spam, who knows. But what we do know is that it’s annoying, time consuming and most worryingly, it’s on the rise. According to a recent Gartner survey, two out of every three emails are spam. At this point last year, less than half of all emails were spam. Sobering figures indeed.

So we know what it is; we know it’s not going to go away in a hurry; so the next logical question is “How do we stop it?” Well, the simple answer is, we can’t. As long as there is email, there will be spam. We can, however, reduce the amount we receive.

There are two essential elements to controlling spam. The first thing to do is educate your users. While most organizations have some kind of email policy, few have a definitive standpoint when it comes to unauthorized email. A good email use policy and education program would include guidelines for things like email newsletters and online forums for example – prime hunting ground for spammers. Every time a user signs up, they will most likely have to enter their email address. How can they be sure their email address will not be handed over or snatched by spammers? They can’t, and often it will be. Once they’ve been spammed, what about unsubscribing themselves from a spammer’s database? In theory it makes sense, in practice it’s the worst thing they could possibly do. By hitting the reply button to unsubscribe they are effectively saying to the spammer “Hello, yes I’m here. I’d love to receive more of your emails!”

The second element in this damage limitation exercise is to deploy an appropriate anti-spam software solution. There are many of these on the market today. In the SME sector, they can be divided into two categories: server level and client level. A server based solution might sit on your internal email server or gateway server. There are several advantages to this type of solution; Spam will be caught as soon as it enters your organization; it will not make it through to user desktops. As it is server based, the software can be managed centrally, so there’s no need to visit each workstation to configure software with updates or patches. Client level spam protection needs to be installed on every workstation, a time consuming exercise. Any software updates need to be applied to each machine, again adding to admin time. You then have to be sure that the users are not likely to tamper with its settings.

Anti-spam software, whatever the variety, can use a variety of methods to combat unsolicited emails. One of the most common technologies is keyword checking. In basic terms, you tell the anti-spam software the words you don't want to see, and it scans incoming emails for them. Another method is via a collaborative database. This might include a propriety database supplied by the anti-spam software vendor; a list of known spammers or known email topics. Alongside this, it may employ an external DNS Blacklist; effectively a dynamic list located on the Internet of known spam and relay servers the world over. A very effective tool in the fight against spam. Finally, anti-spam software may use some form of artificial intelligence. You might have to train the software to understand what kind of emails you would like to receive – also known as “ham”.

There is a wealth of anti-spam software on the market today. All the big names you'd expect, notably Microsoft who will be introducing their Smartscreen product to the market place later this year. The current leader in this competitive market is UK based SurfControl who offer a variety of scaleable content filtering solutions. Of course none of this software is the panacea to end all spam, but if it can reduce it by 50% or more, it has to be an improvement.

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