Victims Paying for Spam

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In my last rant about spam, I mentioned that the fundamental problem causing spam is that unscrupulous people have virtually no costs for sending unwanted e-mail. As Jeffrey Benner put it in his review of antispam laws, spammers are different from telemarketers because making phone calls costs money whereas sending junk e-mail doesn’t: “Telemarketing costs money, spamming doesn’t. The high cost of making phone calls means marketers would rather spend their resources calling people who might actually be interested in what they're selling. That's why, aside from fear of prosecution, most telemarketers comply with do-not-call lists.” In contrast, says Benner, all attempts to develop opt-out do-not-spam lists have failed [1].

In contrast, every recipient of the growing flood of spam pays for that problem in one way or another. Everyone loses time, wasted bandwidth and disk space. Granted, a home user may not place a monetary value on these wasted resources or the time spent getting rid of the junk, but business organizations certainly do. The time wasted by employees paid hourly wages costs money in lost productivity or in overtime; the time wasted by non-salaried (overtime-exempt) employees cuts into efficiency and may marginally reduce job satisfaction. Individually, the problem may not seem like much; collectively, for a corporation and even for the nation, spam is a significant problem. In a recent report by Nucleus Research, spam was estimated to cost US companies over $800 per employee per year in lost productivity [2]. Ferris Research estimated that the total losses incurred by US corporations in 2002 as they coped with spam reached almost $9B [3]. They pointed out that corporate losses included time wasted calling technical support to fight spam.

Some projections from the trends are alarming (others might say alarmist): if the growth in spam continues, “According to Jupiter Research, . . . the average e-mail user should expect to receive nearly 3,900 junk e-mail messages per day in 2007. [4]”

Public rage against spam is rising. According to a November 2002 poll by Harris Interactive, an overwhelming majority (80% of a sample of 2,221 adults) of the US Internet-using public found spam “very annoying” and 74% of the sample wanted spamming made illegal [5].

In my next column, I’ll look at some of the (largely futile) efforts to legislate against spam.

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References:


loss equals 1.4 percent.
< http://www.infoworld.com/article/03/07/01/HNspamcost_1.html > and
< http://www.computerworld.com/softwaretopics/software/groupware/story/0,10801,82705,00.htm1 >

< http://www.internetnews.com/IAR/article.php/1564761 >

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