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STOP THE SPAM? YES, YOU CAN

Unsolicited E-mail. Junk E-mail. Spam. Call it what you want, nearly everyone with an Internet E-mail account gets it, and nobody wants it. Can you live spam-free? Well, probably not. But there are plenty of antispam weapons for the average Netizen.

An ounce of prevention

First, use your head. Common sense dictates that bulk E-mailers have to get an E-mail address from somewhere. Usually, it's from you. So be a little careful about spreading such information around. Postings you make to Web-based message boards and Internet newsgroups, or even a mention on a home page, leave you vulnerable to bots and spiders -- automated programs that some bulk E-mailers use to trawl cyberspace and harvest addresses. Giving out an E-mail address when registering for a Web site can be another danger, depending on the site. So it's always wise to check whether the site has a privacy policy posted (Business Week Online does), or send a note asking what's done with the data that's gathered. Some sites sell addresses to bulk E-mailers, some don't. But just as a home address can eventually find its way to the catalog merchants of the print world, mailing lists are often resold in cyberspace.

Once you've been spammed, you'll notice that a lot of junk E-mail gives you the option of being dropped from the list by launching a return E-mail. Is it worth bothering? Maybe. Some bulk E-mailers will keep their word. But others might simply bump up those who write back to their "good" list, since now they know they have a valid, active address.

Filter, filter, filter

So you haven't been broadcasting your address, but the unsolicited E-mail keeps rolling in and repeated "remove" requests haven't stemmed the tide. What to do? Try a filter.

Most major E-mail programs, including Qualcomm's Eudora Pro, Claris Mailer, Netscape Messenger, Microsoft Outlook Express, and countless others, give you access to mail filters (which are sometimes also called actions or rules, depending on the program). While somewhat arcane, filters let you tell the E-mail program to look for certain words in the sender information -- such as in the subject line of an incoming E-mail message -- and automatically discard it, move it to another folder, mark it urgent, or do something else with the message.

Used creatively, filters can sniff out spam and deposit it in the trash. AOL offers a feature called "mail controls" for its members. It takes time, effort, and skill to set up

junk-mail filters. But chances are that if you're using one of the major E-mail programs, some industrious soul has already made a compatible filter or script and put it on the Web for others to download. So look around.

If you don't come across such an antispam angel and don't want to plumb the depths of your E-mail package, you may find an Internet service provider or software package to do the zapping for you. While it isn't common, some ISPs filter all the mail that comes their way, before it reaches their customers. And lately, a lot of antispam software has come to market. With names like Spamicide, SpamKiller, Spam Blaster, and Deadbolt, these products -- while they may vary in effectiveness and may only work with certain E-mail products -- can take care of the filtering process without human intervention. They use a predefined list of forbidden senders and other information, provided by the software company and updated over the Internet at regular intervals.

There is one downside to filtering: By their very nature, junk E-mail filters can never be perfect, as the filter makers are always playing a game of catch-up with wily spammers, who are constantly shifting their identities and addresses to outfox the spambusters.

A personal spam assistant?

Taking a different approach, Lucent Technologies recently released an antispam addition to the Lucent Personalized Web Assistant (LPWA), a free Net privacy service made available as a technology demonstration by the company. Called "Target-Revokable E-mail Addresses," this addition to LPWA lets you create a new and unique E-mail address whenever you sign up for a Web site or make a newsgroup posting. LPWA then funnels all E-mail sent to these "virtual" addresses back to the customer's real E-mail account with a tag noting which virtual address it passed through. If a virtual E-mail address becomes clogged with spam, you can turn it off without disrupting the rest of your E-mail.

But is all of this worth it?

The problem, of course, is that every kind of junk E-mail avoidance takes a lot of effort. Although some Netheads seem willing to give their lives over to the cause, most of us just make do hitting the delete key a few extra times each day. Lazy? Maybe, but there's a chance all of this will be worked out somewhere besides cyberspace: There are currently several bills in Congress seeking to regulate, to varying degrees, the junk E-mail industry. Don't hold your breath. But if you're interested, you can find out more about them -- on the Web, of course.

By Patrick Lambert in New York

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BusinessWeek

Updated Nov. 13, 1997 by bwwebmaster
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