Avoiding spam email

Spam in your inbox normally does not hurt anything, but it can be annoying and sometimes time consuming to address. But there are a few things that you can do to avoid most spam; and a few things you can do to almost totally eliminate it, and even give some "payback" to the spammers.

First, consider that most spammers get email addresses from web pages, either pages that are yours (usually in the case of a small business), or from one of theirs – you typed your email address in to some web page or other, or – you merely visited a web page and some malicious software on that web page took advantage of unpatched security problems in your browser (Internet Explorer, Netscape, etc.) and stole your email address right off of your computer.

But some spammers get email addresses by infiltrating service providers (like Qwest, Cox, Earthlink, etc.) and stealing the entire list of customer email addresses. Or an employee of one of these providers might sell the list to a spammer for a quick buck.

So what can we do?

First, I maintain three distinct email addresses. Most people know my email address as harvs@yahoo.com. This is my public address, given freely to anyone. Yahoo is very good at filtering out spam. And, even email with malicious content (viruses) is generally stopped by Yahoo. Best of all, Yahoo web mail is free.

Second, I have a private email address. No one knows this address. I never, ever give it out. It is a Cox address (because Cox is my internet service provider), and it is something like erofijo34l@cox.net. -- Something no one would ever accidentally guess, and something that would be hard to remember and hard to type. I never use this address. But all my email (other than Yahoo) comes to this address, and my email program (Outlook, Outlook Express, Eudora, etc.) checks this email address to get my email.

Finally, I have a third, semi-public email address, one I give to all my close friends and business associates. This one is Patrick@patrickharvey.com. I have a few others like this, and they all ultimately wind up either arriving at my Yahoo address or my private address.

How does this work? First, you will need to pick a domain name and register it. I used www.patrickharvey.com. There are many names available; you might even already have one. Or, your son or daughter might already. It is not expensive – www.godaddy.com will register a domain name for you at $8.95 per year (cheaper for multiple year registration). This alone is not enough, though, you will have to have something called "name servers" for your site, and some instructions for handling email and web requests pointed to your site. GoDaddy will provide name servers to park your site, or charge you for hosting and email. But you can change the name servers to anything you want.

I use a free service, www.zoneedit.com. You can have up to 5 sites for free on zoneedit – but they do not provide you with hosting (Bear with me this is a little complicated). When someone sends email to me@mysite.com, the email program routing the message goes to try to figure out where to find "mysite.com". If you are set up with zoneedit, then it sends your email to zoneedit. Zoneedit, though, knows (because you can configure it almost any way you want) that me@mysite.com really means me@yahoo.com and happily forwards your email to that address. All you really need to know is that when someone sends mail to me@mysite.com that it will go where you tell it, in this case to me@yahoo.com. In my case, Patrick@patrickharvey.com is sent to erofijo34l@cox.net. (Similarly you can make www.mysite.com redirect to members.cox.net/erfijo341 and keep a web site there for free (comes with the Cox service, but that is a topic for another letter)

So when I fill out a form at the mall and they want my email address, they get harvs@yahoo.com. And when my lawyer or my brother wants my email address, they get Patrick@patrickharvey.com. And when I move, or get mad at Cox and switch to Qwest, I can keep Patrick@patrickharvey.com and just change zoneedit to point to my new private address.

But sometimes the spammers will find your semi-private address (putting it on that billboard downtown probably was not the best idea …) and you want to keep the address (one option would be to change it to something else and only update the people you know). There are several services that can solve this problem, also. My personal favorite is www.spamcop.net.

Spamcop has a big list of rules that try and make a determination of whether a message is real or spam. And, the way it works is more of the mail forwarding hocus-pocus we talked about earlier. Essentially you have a semi-public address, me@mysite.com which forwards (via zoneedit) to me@spamcop.net which performs spam filtering and ultimately forwards your mail to your private address. The fun thing about spamcop is that it "detains" messages it thinks are spam, and you can periodically go see if it detained anything real and actually report any spam messages to the originating service providers. Spammers have actually sued Spamcop to try to get them to not filter their spam emails. To me, that is a sure sign that they are doing some good. Spamcop is not a free service, but again, it is pretty cheap at about $30 per year.

So for around $40 per year (just over $3 / month) you can avoid most spam, have control over all your email addresses, and have your own webpage! Not a bad deal.

If this letter was total gobbledegook to you, I apologize, but I'm not sure there is a simple way to describe it all. Real Estate is not that different – sometimes we don't know what we don't know! I sold a few properties myself before I was an agent – and now that I have the real estate education, it terrifies me to think about the liability exposure. I'd never do that again! Let me know if I can help you with any of your real estate needs.

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