I may be crazy, but I'm not stupid.

2004:02

Is spam 'solution' worse than the problem?

Several of the larger Internet service providers have started to include a "service" that you need to know about. It's designed to protect their customers from spam; in the process, the "solution" deletes a lot of valid messages.

I started hearing about this in relation to America On-Line. AOL boasts about deleting millions of spams every day. That may be true, but they also delete many legitimate messages. The owner of a company that does a lot of on-line sales says that most (90%) of his order confirmations sent to AOL addresses never arrive. Because AOL incorrectly identifies them as spam and deletes them without notifying either the sender or the receiver, the company must phone or fax every AOL customer they do business with!

All important messages I receive arrive via my own domain, blinn.com. They do not pass through ISP's mail server because my ISP (Wide Open West) deletes messages without warning! I know this because I have tested the process thoroughly.

Shortly after I moved from Roadrunner to WoW, I decided to use the WoW e-mail account to send myself a list of spam terms. The message never arrived, so I sent it again just to make sure I had used the right address. When that message didn't arrive, I reported it to WoW's support technicians.

"That couldn't possibly happen!" was the technician's response. He asked me to send him a copy of my message. Several hours later, he complained that I hadn't sent it. I had sent it, but the filtering service had deleted it without advising me or him. He still denied that it could be happening.

It took two weeks and a series of tests that exactly pinpointed two terms (unlikely to be found in polite messages) that will result in the deletion of the message. Internet RFCs (Request for Comments) are the "rules" by which the Internet operates. Deleting a message without advising the sender or the receiver absolutely violates the RFCs. The problem is that many ISPs are operated by Internet know-nothings who look for expedient problems without regard to the consequences.

A more insidious problem

During the time I was trying to troubleshoot the WoW problem (something their technician should have been doing but clearly wasn't interested in) I sent a message with a moderately large (4MB) attachment to 4 people. The message was accepted without incident by WoW, but none of the 4 people ever received the message. Even worse, I received no notification that the message had failed. The receivers were in two different domains.

When I notified WOW support about this more serious problem and asked when I might expect a response from the

e-mail specialists, the response wasn't encouraging: "I have been forwarding your correspondence to our engineers so they can work with you on this problem. I have too many daily responsibilities with high call volume, training, etc. I will continue to forward these to appropriate personnel though." That response was polite, but the message clearly was, "Buzz off, freak."

When I finally convinced WoW's level-two technician that the problem was real, he arranged to have a tracking number assigned to the report and forwarded it to the network gurus. That was weeks ago. WoW apparently doesn't know how to fix it, so they "solve" the problem by ignoring it.

AOL is clearly the worst offender because it deletes so many messages. WoW's system probably deletes only a few. Still, deleting messages secretly isn't a good idea. It seems to me that this is an activity that has *class-action lawsuit* written all over it.

I've also heard from Roadrunner users that messages sometimes "just disappear". I think there's a problem when someone is expecting a message and it never arrives even though a trusted associate verifies that it's been sent.

What you can do

If you have your own domain, start using it as your primary e-mail server. Any message you send me goes directly to "mail.technology-corner.com", which is hosted on "tomsk.ip-sys.com". While all messages are examined by SpamAssassin and by GoodbyeSpam, no message is ever deleted secretly. Spams are all placed in a suspense file so that I can check to see if any wanted messages have been falsely identified as spam.

If mail to you (somebody@your.domain.com) is forwarded to your ISP mailbox (you@big.isp.com) I encourage you to start using the domain-based mailbox. Most of my clients' sites are on Akashik.net servers and these servers support both the standard POP3 (post office protocol) accounts and IMAP (Internet mail access protocol) accounts. By picking up mail directly from your domain's mail server instead of having it forwarded to your ISP's mail server, you take the ISP out of the picture. Messages sent to you will get through to you. ß

Let this Treo sing from your pocket

I've been using one of Sprint's Treo 600 phones for the past month or so and the more I use it, the more impressed I am with how it works. The Treo is one of those hybrid devices that is both a phone and a Palm organizer. I'd had a Treo 300 and liked the way it worked – except that two successive models occasionally lost all battery power (and all data) within 2 hours of being unplugged from the charger. The other problem with the Treo 300 was that it was pathetically slow as a Palm device.

With previous Sprint phones, the voice-mail icon sometimes turned on and wouldn't turn off even after I retrieved all of my messages. Resetting the phone might take care of it. Leaving myself a message and then calling to retrieve the message might clear the icon. Or not. Apparently that's still a problem, but the Treo 600 has an option on the *phone preferences* menu to clear the voice mail icon.

The Treo 300 flips open. The 600 model has dispensed with the flip-up cover. That's good because I've heard that the 300's cover was easy to break. Eliminating the cover means that the keys are easily bumped, though, so the keyboard needs a locking feature.

Most cell phones can be locked for security, but unlocking them requires entering a code. The Treo has another locking feature that's easier to unlock. It's designed only to prevent accidental calling, not to prevent unauthorized use. Press one of the activity buttons (phone, calendar, task list) and the phone wakes up, but it won't do anything until the user presses the center button. Perfect!

I'm not all thumbs

The Treo 600 has a keyboard that's intended for thumbs. The buttons are small and extremely close together. The keyboard takes up the amount of space required by 8 keys – 2 rows of 4 – on a standard keyboard, but I was surprised by how well they work. The buttons are relatively tall and have a sharp bevel. In pushing one key, my thumb makes contact with all of the surrounding keys, but the key height and the bevel keep me from pressing multiple keys simultaneously. Clever.

Having praised the keyboard, now I have to say that I don't use the keyboard very often. That's because I prefer a utility application that turbo-charges the "Graffiti" function. It's called "Jot" from Communication Intelligence

Corporation. For more information (it works with most Palm devices) see www.cic.com. The current version of Jot isn't fully compatible with the Treo 600, which uses Palm's OS 5. CIC has to solve some additional problems, but the current version functions acceptably with OS 5.

Palm's design team solved another problem that could have been a substantial annoyance. The screen is touch sensitive and using the Treo as a phone means it touches the user's face. The touch screen can't tell whether it's being touched intentionally by fingers or stylus – or accidentally by cheek or beard. The touch screen includes functions to terminate the call, so a user could accidentally hang up during a call. In the preferences menu is an option to disable the touch screen during a call. Should you need to use the touch screen during a call, you can easily turn it back on with a button press. In other words, the design team did a good job of making this phone functional.

Lose the wait; see the screen

Besides being slow, the Treo 300, powered by a 33 MHz Motorola Dragonball VZ CPU with 16MB of RAM, had a screen that was barely visible in a bright room and imposible to read outside during the day.

The 600 has a 144 MHz ARM processor with 32MB of RAM, a slot that allows users to plug in a Secure Digital, and a screen that is readable in sunlight. The buttons are lighted, which is helpful in a dark room.

The SD slot can accept a memory card, special application card (a dictionary or thesaurus, for example), or a Bluetooth card. No Bluetooth SD card currently exists for the Treo 600, so if you must have Bluetooth, you'll have to wait.

While the 300 offered 2.5 hours of talk time and 150 hours standby time, the 600 claims 4 hours of talk time and up to 240 hours (10 days) of standby time. So far, I have no reason to doubt that.

Despite the odd omission of Bluetooth, the Treo 600 is a pleasure to use. The phone functions perfectly with Sprint's nationwide service so I'm always on time, organized (well, better organized than I would otherwise be), and in touch. ß

CORNER on the market by A.J. Stinnett

Always pull up your pants
before you flush in a public restroom!