

RANDOM

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

THOUGHTS

2004:03

Is the Internet the next 'CB Radio'?

Remember the Citizens Band radio craze of the 1960s? Overnight "everybody" had a CB radio. Despite the limited range provided by low-power 11-MHz radios, they promised to provide the ability to communicate from cars and trucks.

Within a few years, CB was dead. Jammers and other cretins were largely responsible for the demise. Some say that the Internet (e-mail specifically) faces a similar fate. While this is a threat that should be taken seriously, it seems to me that the doom-sayers are a little premature.

CB's appeal was limited. Except for those who installed illegal "linear amplifiers" on their transmitters, users could talk only to people within about a 5-mile radius. That's all users could do.

The Internet differs in that it offers graphics, shopping, video, music, and much more in addition to the ability to communicate. **Even those of us who are on the receiving end 200 to 300 spams per day aren't willing to give up the advantages e-mail provides just to get rid of the junk.**

The advantages include the ability to discuss work-related topics with groups of like-minded people. Add to that the chance to keep in touch with family members, to communicate with clients and vendors, and to read news summaries from almost anywhere and e-mail becomes nearly indispensable in my world. Yours, too, probably.

Beware the deadly attachment!

Spam, viruses, and worms make e-mail the most serious security threat that most corporate IT departments face and the outlook for e-mail as a sales tool in the short term isn't good. Thanks to the people who use e-mail to distribute "malware" to steal personal and financial information, corporations are taking increasingly draconian measures to control e-mail.

These efforts may eventually succeed, but today many of them cause as many problems as they solve. Some companies block any message that includes an "attachment". The message you send with a Word or Excel file may be rejected. But the system may also reject a message that you consider to be plain text because you didn't include any attachments. Even so, the message may actually have an attachment.

This is because of the way e-mail was defined in the 1960s. In those early days of ARPA-Net (the technology that eventually became the Internet) there were no personal computers. Text messages were nothing but "typewriter" text written on a "dumb" terminal. By definition, that's what e-mail is today. **You cannot include typeface information or a graphic in an e-mail message without creating an attachment.**

Include one of these extras and your e-mail application will encode the message and send it as a *multi-part message*. There should be a plain-text part that can be read by anyone. The additional part(s) will be for use by those whose e-mail applications understand HTML or rich-text formatting.



My e-mail application shows attachments on the left.

Does this message look like it has attachments?

These extra parts are "attachments" and that's why a message you consider to be plain-text may be rejected by the receiver's e-mail server.

Those who misuse e-mail create reliability problems for everyone. Receivers are annoyed by a continuous flood of messages from Nigerian bank scam operators, various physical "enhancement" mongers, people "phishing" for financial information, and those who offer drugs, whether legal or illegal. Senders of legitimate business messages run the risk of having their messages deleted by poorly written anti-spam applications or lost in the flood of trash.

The United Nations can't help

Unfortunately, the problem is global and laws – whether from a state legislature or the federal government – have little chance of eliminating the problem. A world government might be able to have an effect, but we're still several hundred years shy of having anything that resembles a world government.

In the final analysis, the likely solution to this technological problem is technology, not legislation.

Random Thoughts or Dead Trees?

Dead Trees seemed to be a somewhat negative name for this publication. Starting with this issue, the new name is *Random Thoughts*, suggesting – if not deep analytical articles – that at least minimal thought during development of the articles. Please note that I still bear no particular animosity toward trees.

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Soon, maybe by the end of this year, there will be prototype systems that will **validate the sender** of a message. When the system can reject messages that come from people who are hiding behind false identities, we will have solved the problem. Think of this as **caller-ID for e-mail**.

Such a system could be in place within 12 to 18 months. Now is the time to contact your Internet service provider to say that you want this system to be implemented as soon as it is available.

Temporrry solutions

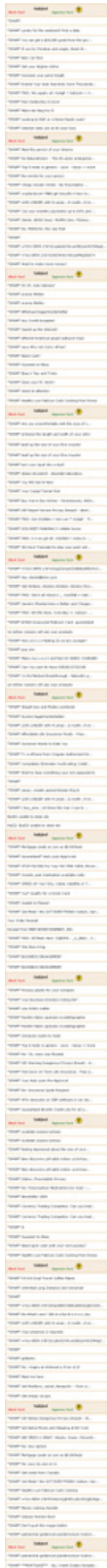
For now, a patchwork of efforts comprises the remedy. Your inbound mail server may have an application such as Spam Assassin installed. Using various Internet resources and some fancy predictive logic, this application marks suspected spam messages. I have found it to be accurate – more than 99% of messages identified as spam actually are. But even at that level of accuracy, the user must still inspect the trash to be certain that a valid message hasn't been discarded inadvertently.

Other methods include challenge-response systems such as GoodbyeSpam. This is an effective system that, when properly configured and "trained" will accurately categorize good messages and spam. But the challenge-response system is no good for a business address. And users must examine messages in the trash to be sure that the service hasn't discarded a wanted message.


Another option used by many people is a special e-mail address

On the left is the data stream from the "plain text" message on the first page. A real plain text version of the message would have been **one seventh** the size!

On the right is a list of my 127 overnight spams from February 21, 2004.



for one's closest friends and business associates. Using a special address for your most important mail is helpful when you're in a hurry and need to check for critical messages quickly. But it's nearly impossible to keep a private address private.

Each of us must find the spam solution that works for us. There is no one-size-fits-all approach yet. Sender validation promises to be the solution and if we're lucky, the solution will arrive before e-mail goes the way of CB radio. 

A picture is worth ...

1,920,000 pixels. That's how many are on my screen at a resolution of 1600x1200. Remember when 640x480 (307,200 pixels) was "high resolution"?

When I want to include an image of a screen in *Random Thoughts*, to illustrate a program, I always turn to SnagIt. It's the screen capture program I've used for more years than I like to think about. The last time I wrote about SnagIt (January 2002), TechSmith had just released version 6. "I used to say that the best screen capture program ever was SnagIt 5, but no more," I wrote. "Now I have to say the best screen capture program ever is SnagIt 6. The folks at TechSmith somehow found a way to make an outstanding application even better."

Again I thought it couldn't get any better until TechSmith sent me a copy of SnagIt version 7 a few weeks ago. Once again I've decided that they can't make it any better, but I also expect to be proved wrong in a year or so.

If you need to capture screen images for documentation or to illustrate a technique, you need SnagIt 7. There is nothing better. It's the best screen capture program on the planet at this moment.

One thing that the TechSmith techies improved from version 6 to version 7 is the ability for SnagIt to see itself. In most cases, you'll want SnagIt to disappear when you're capturing a screen. But for those rare occasions when you want SnagIt to take a picture of itself, it can now do that.

One of the most useful new features in version 7 is stored settings. Telling SnagIt to capture the full screen with the cursor visible takes a single click. So does telling SnagIt to capture a specific window without the cursor. And if I want to capture a scrolling window, that's a 1-click operation, too.

SnagIt comes with several pre-defined set ups and allows the user to add new configurations as well as to change or delete the existing ones. SnagIt is simply the best!

But check back with me next year. 

CORNER on the market by A.J. Stinnett.

A successful manager
has learned the difference between
CHARGE!
and
FOLLOW ME!