

RANDOM

William Blinn
COMMUNICATIONS

179 Caren Avenue
Worthington, Ohio 43085
614-785-9359
Fax 877-870-4892
www.Blinn.com

May 2006

COMMUNICATIONS WITH A PURPOSE

THOUGHTS

Good, Bad, or Indifferent? The Internet can be all three.

Is there a direct subway link from LaGuardia to Manhattan? my younger daughter asked. I thought there wasn't, although I haven't been to New York City for a couple of years. I'd heard that the NYC MTA had finally extended the A line to JFK but that LaGuardia still depended on the Q33, Q45, and M60 bus lines.

I wasn't certain, though. Less than 10 minutes later, I had definitive answers from the MTA's website. Without the Internet, I wouldn't have been able to answer the question without a call to New York.

I find things I should already know

It was a slow night, so I was playing with *Stumble Upon* (one of the world's great time wasters) and ran across a bio of Stevie Ray Vaughn, a blues guitarist who was killed in a helicopter crash in 1990.

The article I read convinced me that I wanted to hear his music. That took me to AllOfMP3, where I found a 49-track 3-CD compilation. I listened to the first several tracks on-line and ponied up the price of the download.

Without the Internet I might never have heard of Stevie Ray Vaughn.

Another of the Internet's great time wasters is *Google Earth*, which was formerly known as *Keyhole*. Calling this program a time waster is a bit unfair, though. Earth can give you an overhead view of most inhabited areas – anyplace with an address or a name. And even those places without names are visible, but you have to get there manually.

As useful as the Internet is, threats are increasing as fast as the benefits.

It's not really a time waster because Earth allows you to see relationships between where you live and where you work, or to view the area surrounding your home. And if you've ever wondered what Moscow or Beijing – or even Baghdad, Iraq, or Kabul, Afghanistan – look like from the air, you can fly there in just a few seconds.

Programs such as Earth require a high-speed connection (which about 70% of Internet users in the United States now have) and a fast computer. Maybe this is an application that will help teachers get school children interested in geography.

And maybe adults, too. How many adults think Iraq and Afghanistan are side by side? (They're actually separated by Iran, which is about as wide as Ukraine.)

Beware the bad stuff

Dangers are increasing, too, even though law enforcement agencies around the world are working to catch the crooks who operate on the Internet.

Recently, I was starting to write for a client an article about phishing (the technique of asking for information that allows a crook to steal someone's identity) and what to watch out for. I sorted through the spam in my e-mail program's spam catcher and found several messages telling me to confirm accounts at banks I don't deal with. One of the spams came to three of my addresses, so I thought I'd use that one as an example.

In less than 10 minutes, I had the answer to a question that previously would have required a long-distance telephone call.

I knew it was fraudulent because it claimed to be from a bank I don't use, the warning had 3 of my addresses in the "to" line along with addresses for other people, and the 3 addresses used for me were ones that I had never given any financial institution.

So I examined the message and followed the link, expecting to find several characteristics that I could describe to show how phishers try to fool people. Trouble was, the hoax was so good that nothing jumped off the screen to scream "Hoax!"

That's just one of the reasons that I have established general guidelines that should always apply to messages that appear to be from a financial institution or a store:

- Never follow a link from an e-mail that claims to be from a financial institution. If you have an account with the company, visit the website and log in without using the link.
- Never provide information that the financial institution should already have (example: Both the security question you provided and the answer unless you're setting up a

new account) or that the institution tells you not to reveal to anyone (example: your personal identification number.)

These guidelines eliminate the need to look for signs that a message may not be legitimate. Because of the ease of sending fraudulent e-mail messages, every message should be assumed to be fraudulent until it is shown to be legitimate.

Another reason that I use these guidelines is the quickly changing face of phishing. As I examined the messages more closely, I found out why the target Web page was so accurate. Instead of creating a fake site, the crooks were actually using the bank's site.

It appears that it worked like a *man in the middle* ruse that's familiar to the intelligence community. I may think that I'm talking to you, but I'm actually talking to someone else who quickly passes what I say to you and passes what you say back to me.

The link in the phishing message claimed to be going to a bank, but the actual hidden link went to a server in Russia. That server then redirected the connection to the bank's website, so that's what I saw.

Everything I typed (had I typed anything) would have been captured by the site in Russia and within just a few hours my account would have been cleaned out. The problem is that the crooks keep getting better at what they do.

We have to be smarter.

That's why my easy-to-remember guidelines work. There's not much to remember and nothing to do. Literally nothing. Just don't click the link. If you feel that the message might actually be from your bank or from a store you deal with, go to the company website by manually typing the URL. By not following the link in the e-mail, you'll avoid whatever new trap the crooks have devised.

Another clever trick involves messages that claim to come from PayPal. I use this service and I have an e-mail account specifically for PayPal communications. The address is used only for PayPal. Nobody other than PayPal and I have the address.

Phishing attempts always come to the wrong address, so they're immediately obvious. I also know that PayPal will always use my name in the message. In other words, the message will never begin with "Dear PayPal User".

A recent message claiming to be from PayPal came to the wrong address and didn't use my name. Clearly, the message was a fraud.

The message told me that my payment had been accepted for a little under \$2000 and the computer I ordered was being shipped to someone whose name I'd never heard in Chicago. Of course, there was a link in the message, too.

The crooks presume that they'll find somebody who's too busy to be safe. That person will see the transaction, read the name, and think that someone has fraudulently used their account. They'll immediately click the link and the faux website they'll be taken to (the one in the message I received was in China) will start asking for information needed for the victims to "prove" their identity.

Once the crooks have that information, it's easy for them to really use your account for fraudulent transactions. The only difference is that you won't hear about them until you get your next bank statement. And then it's too late. **B**

Ends and odds.

Practical joke leads to prison time.

A couple in Israel will spend some time in prison and they've been fined more than \$400,000 for creating spyware. Michael Haephrati says he created a spyware program as a practical joke, but his wife decided to market it to private investigators.

The application allowed private investigators spy on business competitors for their clients. Israeli authorities have also indicted several investigators.

In many areas, governments are taking security and privacy concerns more seriously than they have in the past.

Internet Explorer 7 Beta 2

Microsoft wants the browser market back. Firefox and Opera haven't exactly been taking over, but they have been gaining market share. IE7 beta 2 features tabbed browsing, something the other guys have had for years.

The new browser includes improved security, RSS (real simple syndication) feeds, toolbar search, and tabs. It's available only in English, but Microsoft will be releasing German, Finnish, Arabic, and Japanese versions by mid May.

According to Microsoft, "This beta is another step to our goal of delivering a safer and easier browsing experience when we release the final IE7 product in the second half of this year."

The previous beta broke some applications. For example, WordPerfect's X3 Office Suite has a feature that doesn't work with IE7 beta, but that will be fixed by the time the release version is ready.

Microsoft has even started offering free phone support for IE. They must be getting desperate in Redmond.

Goopsle (a Google oops).

Google accidentally deleting the company's official blog web site late last month. A user, Trey Philips in Austin, temporarily took possession of the Web address, but did so only to keep the blog out of the hands of creeps.

The user claimed the name and set up a page that said "Google, fix your blog pleeeassee! P.S. Just to clear things up, I'm not associated with Google at all. I just wanted to take advantage of this before someone else with less worthy intentions did."

Google's official statement: "We've determined the cause of tonight's outage. The blog was mistakenly deleted by us (d'oh!) which allowed the blog address to be temporarily claimed by another user. This was not a hack, and nobody guessed our password. Our bad." **B**

on the market by A.J. Stinnett

CORNER

"Poor communication
is the root
of most organizational ills."