

Random Thoughts

from William Blinn Communications

December
2009

TECHNOLOGY • MARKETING • COMMUNICATIONS

Did Somebody Say "Random Thoughts"?

That's the name I gave this monthly newsletter several years ago. I picked the name because I might write about hardware one month and marketing the next. After that, it might be software, operating systems, customer retention, or Web design. This month, *Random Thoughts* really lives up to its name.

Tagging the Spam King

Self-proclaimed "Spam King" Sanford Wallace has been in court several times. He's been convicted of illegal activities and fined. He's lost civil cases and has been ordered to pay. He then walks out of court and continues to send unwanted messages from computers he doesn't own.

In the latest trial, a California court awarded Facebook \$711 million after finding that Wallace gained access to users' accounts and sent messages that claimed to be from them. In addition to the judgment, the judge in San Jose referred Wallace to the US Attorney's office for prosecution for criminal contempt of court.

I'd like to think that this will make a difference, but MySpace won a \$230 million judgment against Wallace in 2008. Two years before that, he was fined \$4 million because he ran a scam operation that infected computers with spyware.

Dumping Web Form Spam

A few months ago, a manageable trickle of spam from my Web forms turned into a flood. Dozens of messages per day, then hundreds.

I already had a CAPTCHA (completely automated public Turing test to tell computers and humans apart) in front of the Perl script that processed the forms, but spambot operators had found a way to get around it. It was time to fix the problem.

The spammers couldn't use my system as an open relay, so the spams came only to me. I could have had my e-mail program check for the presence of a token in the message and delete any message that didn't have one. Given the way spam works, I could foresee a day when the count



would hit 1000 or 10,000 or 100,000. The easy solution would have been the wrong solution.

These forms are often processed, as mine is, by Javascript on the user's computer; next the results are handed off to a Perl script on the server. The bad guys could see the Javascript, but the Perl script was invisible to them. That's where I had to solve the problem.

The Perl script receives all of the information from the form, including my special validator token. All I had to do was check for its presence and the presence of a valid value. If it's not there, the process terminates without sending the spam.

Overnight, my spam count from Web forms dropped to zero.

That's probably not the end of the story, though. A dedicated spammer will find a way around this block and then I'll have to develop another kind of block.

For now, though, it's holding.

Free Google Phones

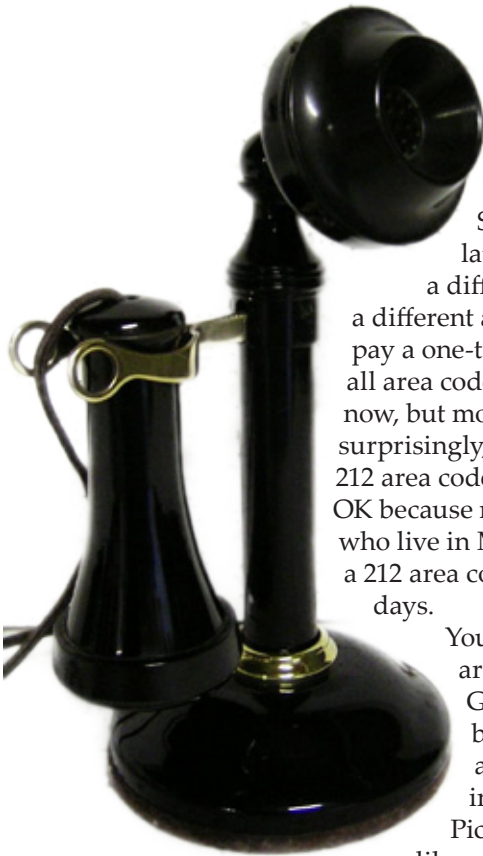
Only a few years ago, there was a rumor that Google would hand out free cell phones. That never happened, but now Google is handing out free phone numbers that will work with your existing cell phone, home phone, or even office phone (if you have a direct-dial number.)

Remember when overseas calls were expensive? Today, you can call most countries for less than 10 cents per minute. The most expensive locations are North Korea (*Who knew you could even call there!*) and Guantanamo Bay, Cuba. And remember when it was difficult to obtain a G-Mail account? You had to be invited.

Obtaining an invitation to Google Voice is even harder. If you sign up on the Google site, you'll have to wait weeks or months to be offered an account. Once you have one, making cheap calls to just about anywhere on the planet is only the start.

Cheapskates are excited; civil libertarians are worried.

When you receive a voice mail message, Google Voice can convert the speech to text and send it to your e-mail address or your cell phone.



When you sign up, you get to pick your own phone number, starting with the area code.

Should you decide later that you'd like a different number or a different area code, you'll pay a one-time \$10 fee. Not all area codes are available now, but most are. Not too surprisingly, you can't get a 212 area code number; that's OK because not even people who live in Manhattan can get a 212 area code number these days.

You can define an area code and Google Voice will begin displaying available numbers in that area code.

Pick the one you like or enter additional

digits for Google Voice to consider. I gave Google the last 4 digits of my cell phone number and it offered me a Worthington exchange number ending with those 4 digits. I selected that number.

Recommendation: Don't do that. I find that it's next to impossible for me to remember the number and, even when I remember it, I'm never quite sure. You're probably better off with a totally different number.

When someone calls your Google Voice number, one of several things can happen:

- Google Voice can ask callers to state their name and then announce the call to you.
- For people you know, you can tell Google Voice to forward the call to your home phone, your cell phone, some other phone, or voice mail.
- If the call goes to voice mail, you can listen to the message as the caller leaves it and choose to answer at any time.

One appealing feature is the ability to record inbound calls. Press 4 and Google Voice announces that the call is being recorded. Recordings are saved online and you can access them just like you do with voice mail.

US and Canadian calls are free; all other calls are reasonable. If you place an international call, Google Voice establishes the call and then connects it to one of your enrolled phones. Google gives you 10 cents worth of credits when you sign up (enough for a 5-minute call to many countries). To talk more, you'll need to purchase credits through Google Checkout.

- To place an international call from the website, click the Call button at the top left of the page and then enter the country code and the phone number.

- To place an international, dial your Google number from any phone. Depending on how you've set up security for your account, you may need to enter a PIN. Then press 2 to make a call by entering the country code and then the number

Witch Oit Fir Typos!

My favorite keyboard, a Microsoft Natural Media keyboard, was wearing out. The arrow keys were sticking and no matter how much I cleaned the mechanical parts of the assembly, I couldn't get any improvement. I even tried a judicious application of WD40. No change. So I bought a similar keyboard, Microsoft's Natural Ergonomic 4000 keyboard. It's slightly different from the old keyboard, but that slight difference is enough to toss my fingers into a tizzy.

The most significant changes involved the Ins and Del keys. Neither is now where I expect it and I'm constantly hitting one of them when I want the Home or End key.

But some of the keys have changed in size, too, which means that the letters aren't quite where my fingers expect them. Now I often get an "i" when I'm expecting a "u". The Enter and Shift keys are smaller and for some reason this causes me to hit Enter rather too often when all I want is a capital letter.

I'll get used to it, but you (which was originally *yoiu*) may see more (*nire*) than the usual (*isial*) selection of typos while (*whole*) I retrain (*retraon*) my fingers. **Bah!**

Windows 7 got to show off a bit when I loaded the software. A few seconds after the setup program started to load, I received a message from the operating system: "This application cannot be loaded because it does not operate properly under this version of the operating system." The message provided a link to the location where I could download the new version.

The installation was a breeze and, when I later plugged the keyboard in, all of the special features worked as expected.

Now if only I could accelerate the process of updating my fingers. This will be difficult because the Microsoft Natural Media keyboard at the office is still working just fine.

Conspicuously Insignificant

I've bought from B&H Photo in New York City since the early days of the store when it was a tiny storefront in Lower Manhattan. These days it's a huge operation at 34th Street and Ninth Avenue. In the early days, I would place an order by phone. A few days later, B&H would hand a package over to the Post Office. A week or later that, I would have the package. Not bad.

The Internet makes it possible for me to buy a lens during a long weekend when the store is closed (Friday afternoon until Tuesday morning for Yom Kippur) and to have it delivered on the following Thursday. Not only that, but I could watch the package as it made its way from a warehouse in Maspeth (an area in Queens) to my office in suburban Columbus.

If all this wasn't so commonplace, it would seem extraordinary. **B**