

Protect Yourself From Unwanted Email

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Well meaning people are constantly being used unwittingly by the misuse of email. They, along with unsuspecting server administrators, are forced to pay the price for the deluge of email designed to sell a product, bring down servers or worse, steal your credit card or personal information. For example, the FCC, Federal Communications Commission, has received over 25 million emails complaining about Madeline O'Hare's petition to ban religious programming like "Touched by an Angel". Madeline has been missing and presumed dead for years and there was never a petition by her or anyone else to ban religious programming. In addition most, if not all unsolicited email requesting money contains a false header, the information designed to let you know who actually sent the email.

There are at least 2 types of Spam or Viruses that may not be readily apparent when you receive them. The first are emails like the example in the first paragraph that request your action, usually to send out more email. The second is a virus warning about a virus that does not exist. The one thing they all have in common is the request to send out email to a certain number of people or to everyone you know. Sending out email is not like sending out snail mail via the post office. Your email can be forwarded indefinitely as the numbers can easily exponentiate as each new person who receives it, sends it to all those on their mailing list.

So how can a person protect themselves from this type of misrepresentation? The answer lies in using good judgment in protecting yourself & your friends by following the 4 basic e-mail rules that follow. Feel free to pass this on if you'd like, but take the time to delete any header information at the top when you forward it. Be responsible. The people you care about are depending on you.

1. Never pass on e-mail that makes a request for you to send it to everyone you know. It's almost always a hoax or a way to promote a web site or just plain irresponsible. If you feel you need to send it on, take the time to search for verification first. Even a legitimate request for help, is inappropriate as unlike regular mail, email is usually forwarded and can be propagated forever, long after a need is met. I have not found one of these request that did not take me to a web site that tried to get me to sign up or wasn't just a hoax, including helping to find lost children and granting a dying child a wish. Legitimate sponsors of these charities use more responsible methods of advertising.

2. Never buy or respond to an unsolicited e-mail regardless of how interesting it appears. It's almost always from someone who is trying to get your money without showing themselves or giving you a way to contact them. The products are usually worthless and can easily be found via a search engine. Many are fraud websites stealing your credit card information. If you are in doubt, try replying to it. You'll find the header is a forgery. Even if it contains a web site URL, it can be forged, if it has an "@" sign in it. They can use someone else's web URL before the "@" sign which will be ignored by their server and take you to their site. For example <http://www.microsoft.com@something> is not from a Microsoft web site. "something" is a decimal equivalent of the real URL which you will be taken too. "something" is usually numbers, but could be letters and numbers mixed. Do you really want to do business with someone who is dishonest enough to trick you into thinking their sales literature came from some place it did not? This type of sales approach makes you and your friends pay for their advertisement. Many of them bounce their Spam off someone else's server, basically stealing their resources and slowing the server up for legitimate users. If there is something you want to purchase, use a search engine to find legitimate sites which clearly show an address, a telephone number and an email ending in the website URL. Then support them. Virtually everyone I do business with on the web has a real person on the reply end of their requested email.

3. Never leave a friend's email on a website, no matter how much you think they might want you to. You'll be putting your friend's email on a list they may not want to be on. That list could get sold over and over, sending thousands of unwanted Spam to your friend. Copy the web site URL and send it directly to your friend and let them decide if they want to register their email. My sister signed me up as someone who was interested in getting free software and software books. Since then, I was harassed by Spam which kept growing in number over the next several months, until I was forced to change my email preventing old friends from finding me. A friend was sent an eCard from someone showing they cared. Two months later he started to get spam. I was able to trace one to a server in Latin America, where the administrator checked his logs and found it originated from the eCard site. If you want to send a friend an eCard, open up a temporary free hotmail account and send the card there. Then forward the message to your friend. DO NOT give anyone your friends email for any reason. Remember, once you get on a list, there is no way to stop it, as it will get sold over and over until your forced to close your account and open another.

4. Never put all your friends on copy to any email. There are software programs that can harvest all the email addresses for Spammers. And many of the "forward to everyone you know", are sent to help create the list. Have you received the one were Microsoft will pay you for email addresses? Did you fall for it? You were tricked. Use BCC or Blind Courtesy (or Carbon) Copy instead. This will hide their email address from everyone on the list and everyone they decide to forward it to. When forwarding a joke or other interesting email, be responsible and delete any email addresses that are shown at the top of the email text. You might just be helping someone who can't afford to pay for downloading a lot of unwanted Spam. I have several foreign friends who can only afford to sign on at an internet cafe once or twice a year.

It doesn't take a lot of work to defend yourself and your friends from unwanted email. Paying attention to and practicing a few simple rules can make the difference. Never pass, buy, leave or put. Never pass on e-mail that makes a request for you to do so. Never buy or respond to an unsolicited e-mail. Never leave a friend's or your own email on a website (use a free email address). Never put all your friends on copy (use bcc). Following these 4 rules will make your email experience a much better one and might keep you from having to change your email address because of too much unwanted junk email. Good Luck

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