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What is Email Spam?

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Spam can be not only annoying but also dangerous to consumers. What that means for you as an email marketer is that the safety precautions that email service providers have put in place to control the amount of spam that makes it into a user's inbox may actually work against your perfectly legitimate and requested email to your subscribers. As you expand your email marketing program, you'll consistently be frustrated by having to fight your way past spam filters. In this section, we'll take a closer look at what email spam is so that you understand why those filters are so very important.

Take a moment right now to go to your email inbox. Now, go to your spam or junk folder. Depending on how effective your spam filters are, when the last time you emptied your spam folder was, and who your email service provider is, you may literally have hundreds of unsolicited email messages in your spam box. Of course, chances are that not only your email service provider's spam filters but also you personally will know that these email messages are junk.

Email Spam Defined

By definition, email spam is any email that meets the following three criteria:

>> Anonymity: The address and identity of the sender are concealed

>> Mass Mailing: The email is sent to large groups of people

>> Unsolicited: The email is not requested by the recipients

There are a number of other less formal characteristics that you will typically find present in spam emails. There is usually no way for a recipient to opt-out of future email sends. The email is typically sent from an international IP address to avoid both tracking and subjectivity to US laws. And, of course, the email almost exclusively promotes "scam" activities that would require the user to turn over sensitive financial or personal information to the sender of the email.

In short, spam email is any email that was not requested by a user but was sent to that user and many others, typically (but not always) with malicious intent. The source and identity of the sender is anonymous and there is no option to cease receiving future emails.

Why Does Anybody Actually Send Spam Emails?

Chances are that most of us reading this email can easily identify a spam message in our inbox and ignore it. However, not everybody is as experienced in the methods of marketing and the risks associated with spam. There are individuals in the world who will respond to spam messages, giving the malicious spammers who sent them exactly the risky financial or personal information that those spammers want. The result can be profit for the spammers and even financial loss for the recipients.

You may say, "But so few people will actually respond to a spam message. Is it really worth sending so many in order to just find a handful of recipients?" The truth of the matter is that spam email is a giant numbers game. The more email a spammer sends, the more likely he or she is to get recipients to respond to the email. If a spam email sender has a list of five million email addresses, only a small fraction of those need to reply to the spam message in order for it to result in significant financial turnover for the spammer.

Also, keep in mind that one of the great email marketing benefits is that the cost in money and time to send emails is quite low. Whether the spam email sender is using his or her own email server or renting a low-cost, offshore proxy server, the cost of sending huge numbers of spam emails is almost always going to be lower than the return. In most cases, it will only take one individual responding to a spam email send to make the entire send worth it to the malicious spammer. Spam email isn't an illogical business practice. It's simply an unethical one. Fortunately, both the US Federal Government and most email service providers have put steps in place to reduce and eliminate spam email.

Why Does the Government Care About Email Spam?

The US Federal Government, in specific the Federal Trade Commission (FTC), cares deeply about email spam and enacted the CAN-SPAM federal legislation act in 2003. CAN-SPAM has been covered in great detail earlier in this book, and if you need to get up-to-speed on CAN-SPAM, we invite you to revisit those chapters. Why does the government care about spam email? The job of the FTC is to protect consumer rights. Spam email can put consumers at risk in two different ways:

Financial and Privacy Risks: Because most spam email is designed to solicit financial data such as credit card numbers or personal data such as a Social Security Number from users, that data can then be used for identity theft, credit card fraud, and a host of other crimes. While CAN-SPAM certainly can't stop those types of emails from finding their way into your email account, it can set up strict fines and prohibitive penalties for any spammers who get caught.

Protecting Children: CAN-SPAM was developed in order to eliminate the amount of unsolicited email that advertised inappropriate adult services to children. There's no way for an email spammer to know the age of a user that he or she is emailing. Therefore, even if the email includes entirely inappropriate (and potentially illegal) images for a minor to see, it may end up being sent to a child's email box.

While most people consider the CAN-SPAM legislation to be fairly ineffective at stopping email spam, that doesn't mean that you don't need to follow it to the letter. CAN-SPAM is still active legislation, and if you are caught violating it you are subject to massive fines as detailed earlier in this book. Fortunately, though CAN-SPAM did not do a significant job of stemming the flow of spam to your email account, most email service providers have done an outstanding (perhaps too outstanding) job of keeping spam mail out of the inbox and into a designated email spam or junk folder.

Why Do Email Service Providers Care About Email Spam?

Without a doubt, your company email marketing program or newsletter will at some point encounter a battle with email service providers' spam filters. In that moment of frustration, you will wonder why an email service provider cares at all about whether a spam message goes to the inbox or the junk folder and why the spam filters are so prohibitive. The truth is that, for email service providers, having good spam filters is just good business. The "customer" of an email service provider is the person with an email account. Most email service providers make their revenue based on the amount of time that a user spends in their inbox. For example, most online email service providers serve web-based ads within the online version of an email inbox. The longer users stay in their email inbox, the more likely they are to click an ad or the more ad impressions are served.

If users become frustrated with the experience of receiving high amounts of spam emails in their inbox, they will respond by either spending less time in their inbox or by switching to an email service provider that gives them a better experience and better filters out spam. Therefore, it's a critically important business practice for email service providers to give their customers powerful and effective email spam filters.

But Your Email Isn't Spam!

If you're reading this book, then you are working to put together a legitimate, non-spam email program. You know that, and we know that. However, to an email service provider you are largely an anonymous source (unless you get on the white list, which we'll discuss in the next section). Email service providers will use a series of filters and data associations to determine if your message is spam or not. In some cases, this won't be a problem for you. But sometimes even the most innocent emails will appear as spam to an email service provider's spam filters. In the next section, we'll tell you all of the best ways to avoid that.

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