



## **Chapter VIII**

# **Issues and Perceptions of Unsolicited Commercial Electronic Mail**

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### **ABSTRACT**

*The proliferation of unsolicited commercial electronic mail (UCE) or spam is becoming a global concern for many organizations. This chapter explores issues of unsolicited email, the cost and loss of productivity, the impact of UCE and computer viruses, privacy concerns, electronic mail filters, attempts to control spam, and legislative action. A strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats (SWOT) analysis was also applied in this study. The results of a survey concerning the perceptions of UCE are presented. The results clearly show that while the respondents find spam annoying, they spend very little time in dealing with it. Although the respondents express the need to control spam, they do not believe that governmental control is the solution, but rather that Internet Service Providers and organizations should take the responsibility for controlling unsolicited email. Lastly, the respondents are very unlikely to open, let alone read and respond to unsolicited email. The results of this study will be useful for guiding organizational, university, and public policies.*

## INTRODUCTION

The term “spam” is often used to refer to unsolicited electronic mail (email) and originated from a comedy skit performed on a British television show called Monty Python’s Flying Circus (i.e., “Spam, spam, spam. I’m sick of spam!”). The term spam has since evolved and is defined as unsolicited commercial email (UCE) from a sender that the receiver does not know or cannot identify (Fallows, 2003). Just about everyone who has an email account has received UCE from Internet marketers or other organizations that attempt to sell or advertise products or services or solicit monetary contributions that are not expressly requested. Direct Internet marketers, who flood the Internet with many copies of the same message and target individual email accounts, are often called spammers. These messages often include commercial advertisements for questionable products or services, get-rich-quick schemes, or pornography. According to Solomon (2002a), spam or junk email can be categorized as unsolicited bulk email, unsolicited commercial email, chain letters, duplicate postings, pop-up ads, virus warnings, banner ads, jokes, or Internet service provider (ISP) information.

Spam has proliferated over the years because it is a relatively inexpensive medium for reaching a large, growing audience. For example, the cost of an email campaign is only about \$1,000, compared to about \$20,000 for doing the same campaign using direct mail (Disabatino, 2000). Moreover, the effectiveness of an email campaign becomes a numbers game. Depending on what product or service a direct marketer sells, a response rate of about 2% is typical (Mangalindan, 2002). To be effective, therefore, a direct marketer must send out 5,000 emails in order to receive 100 responses. According to Greenspan (2003c), the payoff for spammers comes from the 7% of the recipients of unsolicited email who order a product or service.

Moreover, the cost of sending out bulk emails is so low there is very little need to target the emails directly to individuals. Subsequently, adults and children often receive unsolicited email that is either inappropriate or offensive. In fact, a recent survey of 1,000 Internet users by Symantec reports that 47% of email users between the ages of seven and 18 have received emails with links to pornographic web sites (Greenspan, 2003a).

It is estimated that the number of worldwide email messages sent annually will increase from 230 billion in 1996 to 9.15 trillion by 2006. Of the 9.15 trillion email messages to be sent in 2006, 2.92 trillion will be spam (Solomon, 2002b). In fact, two of the largest ISPs, America Online (AOL) and Microsoft Network (MSN), report that they block 2.4 billion emails each day, while AOL says that 80% of all its incoming email is spam. Moreover, in August of 2003, Yahoo conducted an internal survey of its email service and found that, given a choice, 77% of the respondents would rather clean toilets than delete spam from their email boxes (Perez, 2003).

The amount of UCE individuals receive also threatens to saturate or create “in box-burnout” whereby consumers become less responsive to legitimate email cam-

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