

The new SPAM®... it's not just lunch meat anymore!

By Mike Dooley, NSDCAR Systems Administrator

Spam and the NSDCAR member

An increasingly common occurrence here at the North San Diego County Association of REALTORS® is the phone call from a disgruntled member, accusing the Association of marketing their email address to purveyors of bulk unsolicited email advertisements. Unsolicited bulk email, commonly referred to as “spam” amongst the Internet community, is at best an annoyance, and at worst can bring an email server, (the computer that handles large numbers of email addresses, similar to a post office), to its digital knees in a matter of hours. These annoying attempts at marketing of (mostly) shabby and questionable products and services can also provide the vehicle for invasion of your computer by viruses, destructive programs like “Trojan Horse” attacks, and myriad other useless information snippets which can fill one’s hard disk storage to capacity, and just generally make life on the Information Superhighway a real pain. Currently, there are significant attempts at regulation of unsolicited email that are pending legislative enactment at the federal and state level. For an excellent source of information about “spam laws”, visit <http://www.spamlaws.com>. Here in California, the **California Business and Professions Code, SECTION 17538.4, as amended by Assembly Bill 1676 (1998), (approved by Governor September 26, 1998)**, affords one the protection of an “Opt-Out” or “Opt-In” process for bulk email and fax marketing, though enforcement of these spam laws is virtually nil in the case of foreign or “offshore” sources of electronic junk mail.

In the interest of information and clarification, I’d like to put any accusations and rumors to rest... the North San Diego County Association of REALTORS® does NOT, and has NOT EVER sold lists of email addresses or other member information to any other entities for marketing purposes or, for that matter, any purpose whatsoever. It is our policy to refrain from such activity, regardless of the temptation such revenue streams may represent.

Why hide from the global community?

The fact is, an email address is just like your home address; it is public information, and there are no legal restrictions to the exchange or marketing of that information for purposes of otherwise legal activities. If you’ve signed up for an email account with any ISP, (Internet Services Provider), and dependent upon their individual policies with regard to privacy, your email address has become a matter of public record, and may be made available to a plethora of marketing firms and home-based bulk email artisans. Check with your potential ISP candidates, and get a look at their written policies in this regard. Some ISP’s proudly advertise their preservation of your privacy as a feature of their services. At the 2001 Inman Connect Real Estate Technology conference in San Francisco, I was surprised to learn that there are almost no legal restrictions to what’s referred to as “Data Mining”, in which corporate entities gather demographic information from their customers, members, employees or website visitors, and then re-sell that information to other entities interested in marketing to those particular demographic targets.

I cannot think of anyone who makes even moderate use of the Internet who has not received an unwelcome load of bulk email, advertising anything from herbal or mechanical methods of improving one’s health, to offerings of website memberships featuring questionable products and services. As with any relatively unregulated medium, there are those who will take advantage of any opportunity to become purveyors of filth, junk, outright fraud, and just aggravating solicitation. It’s the price of freedom, the price of unregulated communication with a world community of computer users, and whether the price is justified or worth the expenditure is not for this observer to judge, nor are these pages a likely forum for such deep philosophical discussion.

Try to imagine, if you will, a society in which each of us had the right to hide our home address from the world. As your garage begins to burn to the ground, taking your brand new automobile with it, and you frantically dial

“911”, you find yourself having to explain the best method of land navigation for fire trucks to use in finding your location. Or, as your neighbor sees that burglar climbing into your window, she valiantly attempts to send the police department to your rescue, but has to tell them, “Yeah, the blue house with the big pine tree, 3 doors up on the right, just past the corner of the street west of the main boulevard, right after the fourth traffic light past the state highway, as you’re traveling north out of town, you know, where Jake’s barn used to be!” You get the picture, yes?

Unintended participation; the unwitting SPAM volunteer

Why, then, do so many of us regard our email address as a piece of “secret” or “private” information, and express such resentment when someone discovers it and sends us an advertisement? Perhaps some of us scream at people who accidentally dial our phone by mistake, and perhaps those same people are the ones who instantly become irate or suspicious when they receive an unsolicited email. It’s interesting to observe that many people who become exceedingly upset at the thought of having their email address sold to another company for marketing purposes will completely forget that *they* have given this information to literally thousands of companies, simply by being unable to resist filling out that sweepstakes entry which qualifies them to win a car or a trip or some other (usually spurious) prize, offered on their favorite website. Additionally, many email users are blissfully unaware that when they click on the link at the bottom of an unsolicited email, the one marked “Click here to unsubscribe from this mailing list”, they are in fact distributing their address to a whole new group of spammers. Deceptive? You bet. Annoying and underhanded? Certainly! Illegal? Nope, not yet.

Another practice which makes the company’s “computer guy” unpopular, but which really needs to be controlled, is the chain email. With the recent terrorist activities in New York, there’s been an upswing in this already prolific practice; sending emails to everyone you know, to spread some inspirational message, or to warn of a virus, or just to share a good (or not) joke. These mass mailings are not only a non-business load on your company’s email server, but they’re an excellent source for spammers to gather email addresses. Send a lot of these “sharing” emails, and you’ll soon note a corresponding increase in your unsolicited junk mail, as will all the wonderful folks with whom you “shared” your message. Indeed, the Internet is rife with automated “spiders” or “spam-bots”, which are programs that browse the web, looking for those tell-tale “@” symbols, then harvesting the email addresses which surround them, to be used by unsolicited bulk email practitioners in their annoying practices. If you’ve been a regular visitor to your NSDCAR website, you may have noticed that email addresses which were initially published on our pages have changed. Now, there’s a link that says, “Send email to Mike”, and the address only shows on the status bar at the bottom of your browser screen, and only when your cursor is hovering over this link. This is called “cloaking” of email addresses, and we’ve begun using this method to keep all of our published email addresses away from the automated harvesters of spamming lists.

Okay, it’s a problem... where’s the solution?

“So,” you may ask, “there’s nothing I can do to stop this annoying inundation with junk computer mail?” Well, there are, indeed, a few steps you can take to minimize the annoyance, though you’ll probably not stop it altogether.

First of all, instead of acquiring a single email address, and attempting to keep it a secret, (which, if you think about it, just about defeats the purpose of having an address, doesn’t it?), gather several email addresses, and assign them specific purposes in your overall scheme of communicating on-line. For instance, I keep a free email address from Microsoft’s Hotmail website, and this is the address I use whenever I’m asked to provide an email address as part of an on-line purchase or transaction. This way, when the company from which I’ve just purchased that beach chair on the web sells my information to “surfboys.com” or “umbrellas-R-us.com”, all the spam email lands in my Hotmail account, instead of the email account that I use for corresponding with family and friends. I use yet another freebie from Yahoo to keep track of all my electronic subscription publications.

To avoid belaboring the obvious, it's easy to see that these methods can result in a pretty manageable set of rules for distribution of your electronic mail, and to keep your important communications separated from the dross.

Added to these practices, most email "clients" or programs, and even most of the free web-based email accounts now offer control features such as filters and bulk email folders which make the task of managing the junk mail fairly painless. One can, with the assistance of a "wizard" program built right into the user interface screens, set up automated responses to mail from certain senders, and choose to either reject delivery of the junk mail, store it in a special folder for later, automated deletion, or even return equally annoying messages (in equally annoying quantities), to the source address of the unwanted spam. This is why spammers have recently resorted to using "anonymous" addresses provided by wildcat foreign email websites, which conceal their true identity and are frequently changed or removed quickly, to further restrict responses from the recipients of their garbage. A closer look at the "From" address in spam emails can be very educational. Take a look at this example:

Received: from ns.itecsystem.co.jp (211.0.41.50 [211.0.41.50]) by server.nsdcar.com with SMTP (Microsoft Exchange Internet Mail Service Version 5.5.2653.13)

id QBACSLAY; Wed, 12 Sep 2001 14:50:05 -0700

Received: from Hi8y4OgRH (unverified [65.130.137.31]) by ns.itecsystem.co.jp (EMWAC SMTPRS 0.83) with SMTP id <B0000187816@ns.itecsystem.co.jp>;

Thu, 13 Sep 2001 07:10:44 +0900

DATE: 12 Sep 01 4:59:06 PM

FROM: aR6159y5S@sersa.best.co.jp

Message-ID: <g9Bp7HV1gWFMtjTl2@Z89w35Ye096re4F38C>

TO: Undisclosed Recipients

The last element of the address is the letters "jp". This reveals that the sender is routing mail via the country of Japan. There are numerous other country abbreviations, such as "nz" for New Zealand, "de" for Deutschland (Germany), "kr" for Korea, etc. Notice that there are two "Received from" lines, and also a "FROM:" line, in this header. Notice also that nowhere in these lines of addresses do you see an actual person or company's name, and that the "To:" address shows "Undisclosed Recipients". This spammer is hiding three layers deep, and finding the actual originator of the junk mail is next to impossible for any but the most astute of computer geeks, armed with a plethora of expensive tools for analyzing data.

Even knowing the name and address of the server computer your mail arrived *from* gets you no closer to the originator, and control of these junk-mail mavens, for whom the marketing game is truly a "numbers racket" is an impossibility. They're going to collect addresses, and continue to spew their spam in your direction, no matter what. A little judicious use of your information, however, can keep the whole phenomenon quite manageable, and reduce it to a minor annoyance. And to refrain from giving your email address to important organizations in your life, such as your REALTOR® Association, is just plain silly. The benefits of instantaneous communication, reduction in paper consumption and needless waste of natural resources, the convenience of being able to delete your junk mail without having to put a new liner in your kitchen garbage container, all outweigh the minor irritation of getting an unsolicited bunch of digital dross in your Inbox. How would you rather have your dues dollar spent... \$300.00 in postage fees, \$180.00 worth of paper, toner, labels, and envelopes, and \$200.00 worth of multiple Association staff members' time to mail you a flyer? Or, \$10.00 worth of a single Association employee's time to send out an email notification? No rocket scientists needed, here.

Practical ways to manage the mess

Here are some suggestions for coping with the flood and maintaining some degree of sanity:

- Get yourself a couple of free email accounts on the web and use them like file cabinets, for specific, targeted purposes. For instance, assign one of these addresses as your “I don’t care” email address, to fill in the blanks on contest forms, to mail requests for sales or product information, or to give out to folks you really don’t care about hearing from. Use another strictly for family correspondence. Assign yet another for your business purposes. Consider purchasing a domain name, such as “john_doe_realtor.com” for this business mail. There are numerous advantages to having your own domain name, especially when you need to move from one Internet Service Provider to another.
- Double-check all your Internet software, and make sure your real name, address, email address, phone number, or other personal information is not stored in any of the little boxes you fill out to identify yourself on-line, except when doing business. For instance, if I’m in a chat room, and someone tries to obtain my email address, my chat program gives them: “bullwinkle@whatsamatta.U”. This is a totally fake email, and nosey Nellies get no real information from it. If they’re friends, they’ll know how to contact me and ask me for the real deal.
- Lastly, give a real, accurate email address to your REALTOR® Association. We need to reach you easily and economically, and this is the best, fastest, and cheapest method available.

We know about email... but what is “Dmail?”

The North San Diego County Association of REALTORS® is progressing into the role of “e-Association” at a rapid pace, and our aim is to better serve our membership by saving your dues dollars for meaningful and useful expenditures that make your professional life easier, more productive, and more respectful of your busy schedule. One of the tools we employ toward these ends is electronic mail, or colloquially, “email”. As part of our District Council functions, we’ve introduced a new service called “Dmail”, or District Council Mailer.

Using a specially crafted list-serv program, your District Council representatives are able to instantly send electronic mail to a single district, all districts, or selected recipients within a district. Recipients may respond in a controlled, moderated fashion (as opposed to an open discussion forum), and NSDCAR District Council leadership can now reach their constituent membership more quickly, efficiently, and at less cost to the Association.

Don’t hang out in the Rest Area!

One major challenge facing us in employing technology to the Realtor’s advantage is lack of accurate email addresses for our entire membership. If you’re hard to reach without a time-consuming telephone, fax, or postal process, then you’re not out there on the Information Superhighway... you’re parked in a rest area. Don’t miss out on opportunities and important information, or end up feeling like you’re the last to find out about something; make sure your Association has a good, working email address for you, and the URL for your website. Contact our Member Services staff to check and update your email and website address, especially if any of this information changes, or you move to another brokerage or company. As we continue to weave the intricate tapestry of our e-Association, these bits of essential communication information will enable us to provide that personal touch that makes your Association a business partner, a service source, and an electronic “toolbox” of goods and services, all available at the click of a mouse. Your professional competition is using these technologies in ever-increasing numbers and with ever-increasing skill and efficiency; don’t be left out or get so far behind that your bottom line suffers! Mice that don’t click won’t get much cheese, will they?

The Cheese is moving... get back into the Maze!

Visit your NSDCAR website at <http://www.nsdcar.com> and check out the classes being offered to help you get “up to speed”. If you’re feeling overwhelmed by technology, don’t let your resistance hold you back... dive in, ask for our help, take a class, or just play around with some of the programs and tools built right into the operating system of your personal computer. Above all, try to enjoy your encounters with technology, and be challenged and motivated by all the new stuff out there. It’s not going to go away, and more of your world is going to be networked, electrified, and automated as time goes by. Yesterday’s nuisance will be tomorrow’s indispensable service, and those who invest a little time and energy now will be leading the pack, and soon. It’s an exciting time to live in, and those old MLS books make excellent booster seats for the grandkids at the dinner table. Of course, if a bit of technology really has you stumped... ask one of those kids!