



The Spam Guide

The Internet, great as it is, has spawned some unfortunate habits. Just when you thought you could have some form of mailbox that was junk-free, you have more unsolicited e-mail than legitimate messages. If your children have an account, chances are, they are already on some interesting mailing lists, even if they have never signed up for anything. It's never too early to help them see the difference between real e-mail and "spam" that should be deleted without opening.

Many adults have lost money, time or have been frustrated by offers "too good to be true". In addition, chain letters, whether from well-meaning friends or strangers, clog mailboxes in ways that drive most people crazy.

What are some of the typical types of junk e-mail or spam?

The Scourge of Glurge

That sappy, icky, designed to inspire and bring a tear to the eye mail actually has its own name: glurge.

Glurge usually tugs at the heartstrings. Inspirational stories about little boys, who sing their infant sisters back to life with "You Are My Sunshine", are generally false, and the feelings of those who send and receive them differ. Some people know they're false, but figure that the message behind them is so important that it doesn't matter. Others think they're real.

When you get glurge, discuss it. Should you send it on? How did reading it make your child feel? Would you want the next person in your address book to feel that way? Does it have the same impact if it's not true?

Chances are, whatever your feelings are, you're not going to stop getting these types of stories. The issue with glurge is your policy on forwarding it or keeping it to yourself. Some people love getting it and are inspired, others can't stand it. It's an early lesson "netiquette" that kids need to learn and most adults are just trying to keep up with.

False Calls to Action

Another type of spam deals with people in peril, which may or may not be true. Most of them are woefully out of date.

Witness the case of English lad Craig Shergold. In 1989, before the Internet had taken hold, a mailing was going around for Craig, who wanted to break the Guinness Book of World Records for the largest number of business cards accumulated by one person. He wanted to do this before he died of cancer.

Fast-forward and Craig is an adult, cured, and his local post office and even Craig himself are pleading with people to STOP sending sacks upon sacks of business cards. It has become a headache for him, yet the hoax continues to circulate via e-mail to this day, causing a real problem for this cancer survivor.

Another popular one involves an irate woman who was allegedly charged \$250 for a cookie recipe, and has decided to get even by spreading it all over the Internet. This story is also false, and actually contains a pretty ordinary cookie recipe.

Another is the virus hoax. Certainly if there was one to follow up, it would be a virus hoax. You'll want to find out if there truly is a new virus out there, and download the patch from your appropriate virus software, if necessary. So your kids should also take these seriously and alert you. But don't be horribly surprised if you find out it's another

hoax, and one of the most annoying kinds, because virus hoaxes are designed to do nothing but aggravate other users.

Certainly, the efforts of well-meaning and softhearted Internet users are a good thing. What is unfortunate is those who originally sent out the pleas knowing they were false, for a chuckle. Should you or your child get one of these and feel a twinge to send it on, go onto the numerous “hoax debunking sites”, to double check, which can help with virus hoaxes, too. Not only are these sites a great deal of fun (You’ll be surprised at some of the things people believe.) but also they’re a wonderful resource. One of the best is www.snopes2.com, or www.urbanlegends.com. WWW.hoaxbusters.ciac.org, run by the U.S. Department of Energy’s Computer Incident Advisory Capability center, is also useful. By making a quick check you can easily avoid multiplying the lie and/or the fear.

Pass This on or You’ll Turn into a Frog

Chain letters have been around as long as mail has. They threaten everything from death to a lifelong lack of love if you don’t put upon your 10 closest friends with the same message. Other, newer Internet versions promise cash from top corporations as part of a “beta-test” for forwarding on the chain. The latter part is, of course, a hoax, but it’s an example of the newer breed of chain letters.

Chain letters are also among the types of spam that tend to come to younger kids. If your child gets one of them, have a talk. How does he feel about getting the chain letter? Is he excited, burdened? Does he really think he will get 600 dishtowels or books? What happens if nobody else on the list sends in the letter? If he feels uncomfortable by the letter, then ask he why he’d want 10 of his friends to feel the same. If he’s feeling superstitious, talk to him about good and bad luck, and whether or not a random letter can really affect a life. If nothing else, chain letters can play mind games with the recipient, especially a youngster with a fertile imagination. By discussing this with your child, it will help him become a better consumer in the future, if not less superstitious.

It’s Just Junk Mail, Who Cares?

Sometimes one must stop and marvel at the amount of trees that have given their lives for junk mail that we've never even bothered to read. But with the Internet, many people figure that without wasted postage and paper, what's the harm?

In reality, there is a calculable financial cost of passing around hoaxes, chain letters and glurge. According to hoaxbusters.ciac.org, "If everyone on the Internet were to receive one hoax message and spend one minute reading and discarding it, the cost would be something like: 50,000,000 people x 1/60 hour x \$50/hour=\$41.7million."

On the one hand, you can postulate that \$50 per hour is a bit overstated. What most people cannot dispute, however, is the fact that most Internet users spend far more than one minute shifting through spam per day, so the numbers probably balance out.

Often times "spammers" use computers that do not belong to them to forward on their messages. The utilization of these systems and the networks they are connected to can be considered **theft**.

In addition to the man-hours lost, at work or home, due to spam on a worldwide level, there is the issue of such a large amount of erroneous e-mail helping to fill up bandwidth. Ever find the "system slow" at certain times? When you and your child refuse to send spam, you're part of a solution that will keep the lines free for useful exchanges.

Another thing to consider, when you forward a chain letter, glurge, hoax or spam, in many cases you're forwarding on the e-mail address for yourself and everyone else who got the letter with or before you. Some "spammers" love these, because they're free mailing lists. So if you've ever wondered, "why on earth did I get this offer?" it could be because someone sent your e-mail address out with the rest in their address book, and down the line, because someone forwarded it on, it fell into the wrong hands.

In the future there will probably be better filters written to help people keep junk mail out of their boxes before it enters. There are already some measures one can take. People

will continue to try to sell via the Internet, en masse, unsolicited, until legislation orders otherwise. Probably, as the human race gets more familiar with the ways of the Internet, fewer scams and hoaxes will take root, as it will become second nature for people to recognize when something's "not quite right". By beginning to discern and discuss e-mail now, your children will be experts by the time they're adults, and your grandchildren will probably find "netiquette" as something they've always known.

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