Outsmarting the Spam Filter

By Joe Dysart

For many e-mail users, getting legitimate electronic mail past spam filters has become something of a blood sport. No matter how many hoops you jump through, no matter how deft your sleight of hand, you find that too many of your e-mails are still being dragged off to the "dungeon of the doomed" for no apparent reason.

Sadly, we now live in a world where "I found your e-mail in my spam folder" is almost as common a salutation as "How are you doing?" And by most accounts, it appears that we're in for more of the same for quite some time.

Consider: A study recently released by Ferris Research, a market-research firm specializing in e-messaging, found that nearly 20 percent of all e-mails never end up where they're supposed to go. Users of all the major Internet Service Providers (ISPs) regularly complain that at least some of their e-mails are being scooped up by draconian spam filters. And a spate of especially egregious e-mail censorings recently prompted the *Wall Street Journal* to bemoan the trend with its article, "Spam Filters Gone Wild."

Indeed, the problem with overly prohibitive spam filters has grown so severe that AOL has made good on its promise earlier this year to begin offering a spam-filter-busting "certified e-mail" service. Under the plan—which kicked off in early May—e-mail from pre-approved senders bypasses AOL's spam filters and arrives in recipients' e-mail boxes completely unscathed. Images, links—everything looks just the way it's supposed to look. And as long as these pre-approved senders continue to play nice, they can send as much "certified e-mail" as they want. The catch: The lucky elites have to pay AOL one fourth to one cent per e-mail for their "certified status." As you might imagine, Yahoo! is eyeing a similar plan. And you can bet that hordes of other ISPs are gawking at these pay-for-peace-of-mind "offers" with their dreams of a new cash cow.

In a phrase, there's never been a more pressing time to knuckle down and bulletproof your legitimate e-mails against the (well meaning) Keepers of the Inbox. Toward that end, here's a roundup of some of the most effective strategies:

Consider a comprehensive e-mail monitoring service. Believe it or not, a cottage industry has sprung up specializing in ensuring that e-mail gets to its intended recipient, no matter what. DeliveryW@tch (www.delivery-watch.com), for example, has the ability to monitor the fate of e-mails once those messages reach the systems of AOL, Yahoo!, MSN and other top e-mail handlers.

The service will also monitor all major blacklists to ensure that your company is not unfairly smeared. Plus, it also verifies that that your e-mail is 1) Sender Policy Framework (SPF; spf.pobox.com) compliant, meaning that recipient systems are able to pinpoint the precise origin of your e-mail, and 2) your e-mail server configuration is optimized for a friendly reception on the receiving end. In addition, it will also run templates of your e-mails through spam filter tests to sanitize your message of recognized "trigger" words or phrases that many spam filters automatically route to the trash bin, no matter how worthy the message.

Pre-test your e-mail for spam problems. If you'd rather not spring for a monthly monitoring service, you can still navigate better through spam filters by running a spam check. A number of free services on the Web will scour your e-mail for common "trigger" words and phrases that automatically send a message to the spam bin. These include Spam Filter Tester (www.deliverywatch.com); Free Spam Check (spamcheck.sitesell.com/) and E-mail Spam Checker (www.enetplace.com/spam-checker.html).

Get white-listed for all the major ISPs. Getting on the good side of the people who process millions of e-mails every day only makes sense. AOL offers detailed information on how to get on its white list at this address: postmaster.info.aol.com/whitelist/. Plus, if you stay in AOL's good graces, you'll be promoted to the service's Enhanced White List (postmaster.info.aol.com/guidelines/enhanced.html). For information on Yahoo!'s white-listing service, you'll need a Yahoo! e-mail account. Once you've logged on, go to "Help" and scroll down to the link, "My e-mail is being blocked by Yahoo!, what can I do?" Click the link, and you'll be presented with a form you can use to secure additional information. (MSN does not publish explicit detail on its white-listing procedures.)

You can also find white-listing compliance tips from other Internet Service Providers under "postmaster," "sending bulk e-mail" and similar headings on their Web sites.

Beseech customers to add you to their e-mail address books. Recipients who add your e-mail address to their e-mail program's address book can often completely eliminate any problems with your e-mail getting through a company's spam filter. That's why many marketers include an "add our e-mail to your address book" with every e-mail marketing message they send as well as with every personal e-mail they send. While you're at it, ask recipients to refer your e-mail address to their IT department's "white list" for the same reason.

Publish detailed instructions on how to add your e-mail address to an address book. As with many things Internet, there's a "trick" to adding an e-mail address to an address book. You need to know the short point-and-click sequence, and many people have more important things to do, like eating the last doughnut and draining the office coffee machine. Some companies get around this problem by publishing detailed quick-and-easy instructions on how to add an e-mail address to any major e-mail program. So, essentially, your recipients can have their doughnut and add you, too.

Investment U (www.investmentu.com/Whitelist.html), for example, offers quick-and-easy "add us" instructions for all the current major e-mail programs, including Outlook, Outlook Express, AOL, MSN, Yahoo! and Gmail. Plus, it also offers instructions for earlier versions of the same programs.

Consider a direct-to-desktop broadcaster. Many companies have grown so frustrated with overly aggressive spam filters that they're bypassing e-mail altogether and reaching current and potential clients in other ways. One method gaining popularity is direct-to-desktop broadcasters, which use RSS (Really Simple Syndication) to create a direct communications link between a company's and a recipient's PCs.

Essentially, people who treasure your e-mails and marketing messages (and isn't that everyone?) can download a tiny program from your Web site that places an icon on their task bar trays—located on the lower right side of their computer screens. Any time you send them a message, the icon flashes or uses a similar alert to let them know that they've received a message from you. They simply click on the icon, and your message is displayed.

In reality, the tiny program they're using is actually a mini-RSS Reader—similar to dozens of other free RSS Readers that are already available on the Web. The difference is that the mini-RSS Reader provided by these programs is branded with your company's name. The good news here is that you won't need to understand how RSS works to use direct-to-desktop software. Once installed, all you'll need to do is cut and paste a message into the broadcast end of the program on your PC, click "send," and you're done.

Some direct-to-desktop packages to check out include Direct-To-Desktop Broadcaster (www.direct2client.us); KlipFolio Branded (www.serence.com/site.php?action=ser_products,klipfolio_branded) and Desk-top Marketer (www.directtodesktopsoft-ware.com/).

Supplement with RSS messaging. Even after taking all these precautions, you may want to add RSS messaging to your communications mix. While admittedly an acronym only a jargonista could love, RSS is an elegantly simple way for a company to send a marketing message over the Web without fear of it getting caught in any kind of spam filter. As with similar products, you don't need to understand RSS messaging to use it. It's simply a matter of telling your IT department, "I need you to set me up with RSS." They'll do the rest (hopefully). After that, just cut and paste your messages into an RSS broadcaster or your RSS-enabled Web site, and you're done.

Supplement with a blog. People who read company blogs are often extremely enthusiastic about its products—sometimes to the point of being evangelical. Why not make sure these people get the latest info on your firm from your own company blog? Like Web pages, blogs can be "RSS-enabled," meaning that anyone "subscribing" to your blog receives an alert in their RSS reader any time you post something new.

Supplement with a podcast. iPods on college campuses are now so "hip," "in" or "sweet" (take your pick) that they're more popular than beer. At least that's the scoop from a recent study released by Student Monitor, a market-research firm based in Ridgewood, N.J. Consequently, if you're looking to reach the oft-coveted college demographic, you may want to add a podcast to your communications mix. The good news here: Podcasts can be RSS-enabled, too. Once someone subscribes to your show, he or she automatically receives your podcast via a Web download onto a PC, iPod or similar digital device.

Courtesy of Specialty Equipment Market Association (SEMA).