



## Mystery of spam unraveled

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The thing about being a Web news editor is, sometimes people expect you to be omniscient about all things Internet. The truth is, I went to school to be a writer, not a computer systems analyst, so there are many computer concepts that are just as foreign to me as they are to the average Joe.

Case in point: e-mail spam. This weekend, while deleting e-mails hawking photos of unsavory girls and magical cures for arthritis, my boyfriend asked me where e-mail spam comes from. My answer? "Your guess is as good as mine."

So today's mission is to unravel the mystery of e-mail spam.

[Webopedia.com](#) defines spam as "Electronic junk mail or junk newsgroup postings" that are "generally e-mail advertising for some product sent to a mailing list or newsgroup."

According to [Netlingo.com](#), "Spam is usually sent to promote a product or service. It is also found in newsgroups, where people post identical and irrelevant messages to many different newsgroups that have nothing to do with the content of the posting."

Although you never signed up to get e-mails from these companies, spammers are quite adept at finding you. According to [Anti-spam-software.com](#), e-mail addresses can be distributed or found by spammers a number of ways: "Some companies you may have had dealings with sell their mailing lists to third parties, spammers included. Spammers also use 'robots' to scour the Internet and harvest any e-mail addresses that they may find."

The origin of the term is a matter of some debate, but the most commonly accepted (and interesting, I think) theory is that the name derives from a Monty Python skit in which characters sing a song mainly consisting of the word "spam."

As [Webopedia.com](#) says, "Like the song, spam is an endless repetition of worthless text." There is another theory, according to Webopedia, that a computer group lab at the University of Southern California dubbed the unsolicited e-mails "spam" because they have many of the same qualities as the canned meat product — no one ever wants it, asks for it or eats it.

So if nobody wants it, why are people sending it? I like to think that spammers are akin to those people who talk loudly during movies or act obnoxious during public sporting events — they're people who get a kick out of annoying the rest of us. However, my research revealed that, to a certain extent, it works.

According to [Netlingo.com](#), "Spammers follow the traditional direct-marketing ploy of saturating the intended audience, hoping for a tiny return — from less than 1 percent up to 5 percent. Spammers don't care about the large number of people they irritate or offend, because there always seems to be those few people who visit their advertised Web site or order their product."

There are ways to avoid spam, or at least put it somewhere where it won't be such a nuisance. Most Web-based e-mail providers have spam filters and bulk folders in place for customers to weed out unsolicited mailings, and there is software available for purchase that will further filter spam.

However, my solution is to round up that 1 to 5 percent of people who do click on spam ads, and get them off the Web, thus making spam good and ineffective. And their punishment? A steady diet of everyone's favorite canned meat product, Spam.

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