

THE SPAMMING DEBATE

By Peter Sidwell

Since time began, there have always been reactionaries, persons opposed to change, in society – daylight saving time, the steam engine, space programs, automatic looms etc. All faced, and some still face, adverse reaction and have even brought about public disorder and violence such as smashing the early mechanical weaving looms.

“If you can’t beat ’em, join ’em” is an apt motto that the reactionaries should adopt or they will surely be left behind. The negative attitude, always prefaced by “if only....” or “what if...”, cannot change the path of progress - it only hurts and hurts only the negative thinking, pessimistic portenders of doom.

Pure scientists make the breakthroughs and application engineers turn the scientists’ work into aeroplanes, motorcars, radio, television, washing machines and THE INTERNET. What wonderful developments they all are, especially the last named! With it, I can talk to my grandchildren, thousands of miles away and, at a negligible cost, we could see each other whilst we are talking.

I can control my bank account locally and another one halfway across the world in seconds or pay the vast majority of my bills the same way – over THE INTERNET. I can buy almost anything from all over world using THE INTERNET and, when I select a particular store anywhere in the world, I am remembered and greeted by name. Of course, I run the risk of my legs atrophying from lack of use but my fingers will be pretty strong!

The point about all this is that business on THE INTERNET on a global scale is now a multi-billion dollar sector of the world economy which opens new markets for all nations to sell their wares, provided that the potential customers can be contacted. This is best achieved by bulk emailing to millions of people all over the world, a practice known by the unlikely name of SPAMMING

and of which no two nations, states or people have been able to accurately and unambiguously define.

The U.S.A. is in a real mess with different states legislating differently so that what is legal in one is illegal in another. Internet and e-business are global entities. If domestic America can’t get its act together, what chance is there of doing so on a global scale?

What is SPAM, Anyway?

One broad definition of spam is “unsolicited mail”. Another says that unsolicited mail is not spam if it offers a product for sale. Yet another exempts unsolicited mail from the stigma of spam if it contains a means of removing the addressee from the mailing list. Others say that the addressee should be personally known to the sender – in which case we wouldn’t get to know anyone in the first place. We certainly have spawned a generation of woolly-minded thinkers!

In fact, we have been spammed for years if we refer to spam as unsolicited advertising, just the exposure that e-business needs. Every morning the newspaper boy pushes some unsolicited mail under most householders’ doors. Do we get angry and get up a petition to have it stopped? No, of course we don’t but it’s unsolicited advertising material and therefore spam. If it’s banned on the Internet it should be banned in the popular press. However, newspapers survive on advertising revenue – our small e-business owners are similarly dependent but are being stifled by the big boys.



If everyone had always resisted change, we would still be living in caves, hunting for our food and rubbing two boy scouts together to make a fire. Since we are not living in such conditions and very unlikely to want to do so, the overall picture of progress has been improvement in standards of living and even the down side of modern living, pollution and global warming, is being addressed.

Why do people oppose progress?

This author is 76 years old and wishes that he had been born later, to see the wonders of technology which are only just beginning to unfold and herald in the technology revolution. Without its predecessor, the industrial revolution, our lives would be very rudimentary! However, many of the older generation feel threatened by the new technology. They believe that you can’t teach an old dog new tricks (quite false) and that society is leaving them behind (their own fault if it does). Even younger people, seeing the down-sizing of employers worldwide, are also reluctant to accept change and, before reaching middle age, are beginning to pine after “the good old days”.

Progress will never be halted and the world as a whole must realise that from the day the first computer was built in 1944, the world could never be the same again.

The maddeningly repetitive jingles on the radio accompanying advertisements and their audio-visual counterparts on television, are all unsolicited and therefore SPAM. I don't hear anyone protesting – certainly not the mass media.

SPAM'S closest relative before Internet was bulk mailing via regular mail. We are still being spammed every day when we open our physical mailboxes. We call it junk mail but it's spam by another name! I hear no organised protest and there is no mass movement to secure a ban on the practice. Why not? Why does the public accept one form of bulk mailing and go ballistic about another? Has every anti-spammer never had something useful in his "junk" mail?

The Anti-spammers

One possibility of the hoo-ha is the existence of pressure groups or lobbies, whose vested interests are threatened by e-business. One can well understand the concerns of big business, which finds entrepreneurs setting up and being able to offer the consumer a better deal. If you're powerful enough, it makes more sense to obtain a ban on your competitors rather than fight them, but competition is the bedrock of business and the public's guarantee of fair pricing. It must not be compromised!

Those most likely to feel the pinch are postal authorities, advertising companies and the mass media. It is not for a newspaper to lobby to ban spam when the public can cover the world for

a few pence instead of paying far larger sums for a very local coverage. It is up to them to come up with competitive ideas or get out of the business. Horses were replaced by motor vehicles and river barges by railroads. Obsolescence is a product of progress and it represents efficiency. Big business has destroyed many a small family trader and it's time for the small man to strike back and assert his right to use the new technology in exactly the way as big business used the mail services. They seem to be able to thumb their noses at anti-spam rules whilst we get shut down by our ISP!

Let's now take a look at the economics of bulk mailing. If your country bans it, your country is the loser. Other countries can solicit and gain your business



graphic: © (Guy Grenier) / Masterfile

whilst you cannot similarly sell in their territory. The result is a one-way flow of foreign exchange, out of your country and into theirs, improving their balance of payments and downgrading yours. In Tucker, GA, during a whistle-stop campaign to explain the Bush administration's policies, U.S. Commerce Secretary Don Evans stated that small business was the hope and strength of the American economy. How very true and yet it is obvious that small business does not have the political clout enjoyed by the minority contributor, BIG BUSINESS, when legislation that stifles small business is being enacted.

A Better Solution

E-business is here to stay and its contribution to the world economy depends upon bulk mailing but, before agreeing to a free-for-all philosophy, let us positively define "SPAM" and set conditions for it. Major national legislation has compounded and confused the problem; perhaps something far simpler, putting the onus for compliance upon the sender, might be easier to put into place and enforce.

This could be easily achieved globally in the following manner:

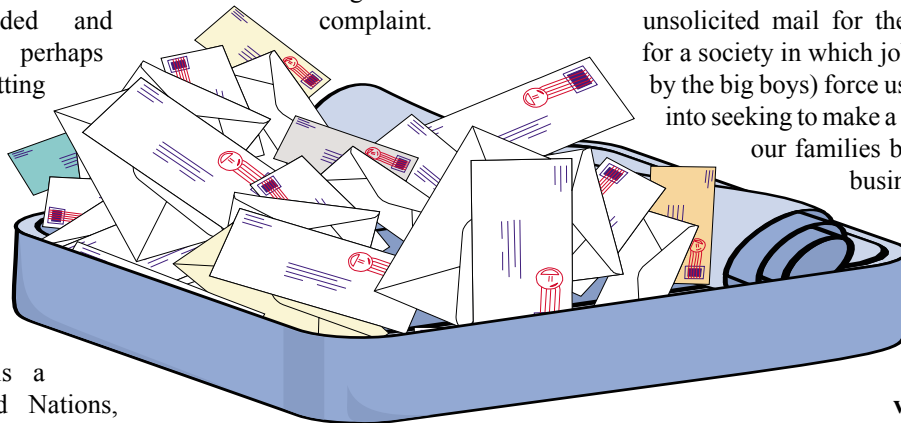
1. Every nation, which is a member of the United Nations, should make all **UNIDENTIFIED** unsolicited mail illegal.
2. Senders of illegal mail should get a deterrent sentence.
3. Legal "spam" should contain the letters ADV in the subject line to allow for manual or automatic diversion/deletion.
4. Legal "spam" should contain a means by which the recipient can have his address deleted from the sender's listings.

In this way, the receiver can immediately identify it as ADVERTISEMENT material and still has free choice to:

1. Read it.
2. Automatically divert it into another folder to be handled later.
3. Automatically delete (discard) it upon arrival.

These are exactly the same choices he has when he opens his physical mailbox with no littering problems or other physical effort except to tap on a few keys. It's not for nothing that program writers use an icon looking like a trash bin for a graphical delete function.

Something similar for "adult" mail would afford 100% protection of minors, a standard that available software cannot achieve and something needs to be done about a standard means of removing oneself from the sender's list. Many are bogus or deliberately made to be slow and frustrating. A simple <mailto:sidwell@cyberway.com.sg?subject=REMOVE> kind of thing is ideal. If it doesn't suit the parameters of auto-responders, let users develop ones that do – the onus is on them. Auto-responders designed to harass the recipient into submission should be made illegal or at least valid grounds for official complaint.



A total ban on unsolicited mail would be an international disaster; but controlling it intelligently would boost the economy, improve the environment and ease the pressure on fossil fuels.

How many people who joined the CND (Committee for Nuclear Disarmament) were aware that they were being manipulated? How many ordinary people go along with the "anti-spammers", totally unaware that they are being manipulated by big business. They are also unwittingly acting against their own best interests and those of the community at large in terms of restricting free enterprise and being subjected to higher prices.

One wonders how much havoc was wreaked upon the stock exchanges and the world economy because .com companies could not effectively advertise and went belly up?

If you have a job, you're lucky but you always face the ogre of retrenchment. At any time you could become unemployed and may need to turn to running a home business to support your families. That may not be an option if we do not establish our right to do so.

PLUM

The big boys kept us under control with snail-mail spamming and seem to be getting away with cyberspam. By mutual back-scratching, they have exempted themselves from the very restrictions they seek to impose upon others.

Join the fight to establish our right to have internationally sanctioned unsolicited mail for the ultimate good for a society in which job losses (caused by the big boys) force us (the little guys) into seeking to make a living to support our families by starting home businesses.

Join the **virtual** society for **Perfectly Legal Unsolicited Mail, (PLUM)**. No forms to fill in, no fees to pay; just spread the word in any way you can. Select your entire address book, attach this file and let her rip. Our BENEVOLENT VIRUS can encircle the world in weeks.



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Under Bill S1618 Title III passed by the 105th US Congress, this message shall not be considered SPAM as the sender has included contact information and a valid method of Removal.