

That's Not Spam, That's My Newsletter!

By Jessica Albon

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For those of us who receive way too many unsolicited emails, Spam filters are a blessing. Switch to the publisher's side of the desk, though, and Spam filters can become problematic.

Before you can keep your opt-in newsletter out of the Spam filter's reach, you have to learn a little about the kinds of Spam filters available. Currently, options range from those installed by an ISP, like Spam Assassin, to those that run with another program, like Microsoft's Outlook, as is the case with cloudmark's SpamNet. Spam Assassin uses a point system to determine whether or not a piece of email is Spam. The more points a particular email collects, the more likely it is to be Spam. SpamNet not only filters based on key words (free!, for instance), but also allows users to submit Spam to then be blocked for other users. Most Spam filters use some sort of blacklist of known Spammers to block emails.

The other component you'll need to be aware of is the blacklist. As mentioned, most of the available Spam filters use one or more of these collections of email addresses and domain names that send out a lot of Spam. Blacklists are primarily compiled by volunteers. In other words, you mail them the Spam you receive in your inbox, they take a look at it and then decide whether or not to add the sender to their list.

Because Spam filters have both a computer component (such as the points system used by Spam Assassin), and a human component (such as the blacklists and the new system from SpamNet), you'll need to make sure your newsletter doesn't raise flags in either camp. Here are some suggestions for avoiding problems.

So your newsletter convinces people

1. Never send your newsletter unsolicited, not even to current or past customers (it's easy enough to ask them if they'd like to be subscribed with a personal email). In fact, it's a risk even to send your newsletter to a list you've purchased no matter what you've been told about the intent of the list's subscribers-can you be sure all of the subscribers expected to receive your email on widgets just because they checked a box saying they were interested in widgets? This will help keep you off the "blacklists" that are available to Spam filters.

2. Provide what you say you will, when you say you will. Don't mislead your audience at the subscribing stage and don't send out emails with manipulative subject lines. Not only is this not good for your reputation, but it may also trigger common Spam filters.

3. Don't type all in caps. A hallmark of the Nigerian Bank Scam, typing all in caps isn't just rude; it may get your newsletter forwarded to a blacklist. Additionally, make sure to capitalize the beginnings of your sentences and otherwise use professional grammar and punctuation. An unprofessional email may be more likely to arouse the suspicions of your readers.

4. Leave them wanting more. If your newsletter is really, really valuable, subscribers who don't get it will miss it. Some ezine publishers have found their ezines are so popular, people who stop receiving the emails actually complain.

5. Make your policy clear. Tell readers how to unsubscribe at your website and in your newsletter. Let them know whom to contact if they have any trouble. And, of course, make sure to follow through immediately.

So your newsletter convinces the computer

6. Steer clear of subject lines that scream SPAM! Words like "free," "limited time," and "money" often trigger Spam filters. Take a look at the Spam in your own inbox for examples of words not to use.

7. Offer directions for "subscribing" and "unsubscribing." Spammers often use the word "remove" in their emails, so you'll want to avoid it at all costs. Plus, in some Spam filters, you actually lose points (the fewer points, the less likely an email is Spam) when you offer subscribing and unsubscribing instructions.

8. Send it from a reputable domain name, or better yet, your own. Free email addresses are often used heavily by Spammers, so you'll want to stay away from them if at all possible.

9. Don't send attachments. Most email readers regard attachments with suspicion anyway and the attachment may trigger Spam filters set up to screen adult material. Both are good reasons to send your entire email in the body of the email. Still not convinced? Many of your readers will have limited inbox space-by avoiding attachments you won't give them an extra reason to delete your newsletter unread.

When you keep up-to-date on the latest Spam filter technology, you may find Spam filters are actually your allies-they may mean your newsletter will have less competition in your reader's inbox.

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