Spam Spam Spam Spam, Lovely Spam!

With all due respect to Monty Python, I'll bet most people don't know that Austin, Minnesota is the Spam capitol of the world. That's right –the Hormel company, only a few miles south of my house, invented Spam back in 1937. Sometimes, I wish Spam would have kept its original meaning. It really wasn't that bad – sure beats lutefisk!

It wasn't until decades later that electronic spam became popular, and lately I've been flooded with it. Here's my favorite, emailed from cyberpharmacy@excite.com: The message screams in huge type, "Get Viagra at the absolute lowest prices available. Make your sex life unlike it has ever been before! CLICK HERE!!"

I've also gotten email from places like qkIJd3cG1@prodigy.net, a_z50@yahoo.com, and doggypup123@arabia.com. If I "click here", I can fix a bad credit rating, earn fabulous prizes and/or $50,000 in the next 30 days, buy a guaranteed legal cable TV de-scrambler, earn a masters or doctorate degree in the field of my choice based on my wealth of life experience, find out the private dirt on anyone and everyone, and ensure my own privacy by filling out a simple web form with all my demographic information and submitting it to some anonymous bozo in the Caribbean.

Based on the emails I get every day, it also looks like people from Anchorage to Australia want me to become a credit card merchant. They all say their program is better than all the others, and they all tell me that I'd better accept electronic payments if I know what's good for me. I am also passing up an urgent opportunity to claim a long lost fortune from a distant relative. All I need to do is give my credit card number to some anonymous huckster, and then I'll find out what government agency is guarding my unclaimed nest egg.

And that's just the tame stuff. Some clown gave my email address to at least one porn site, so now I get solicitations promising pictures of lesbian women, Asian women, Caucasian women, certain celebrities having sex, and lots of other disgusting junk that I'd rather not look at. Now, let me get this straight. These guys want to send me stolen videos of people in various compromising situations, and they expect me to trust them with my credit card number? And people really pay for this garbage?

Here's a get-rich-quick scheme that sums it all up. Some jerk wanted me to start my own porn site, pay him a wholesale price for pictures, and rake in money from people clamoring to look at the "artwork". If I take advantage of the email I regularly get promising 1 million email addresses cheap, I suppose I could personally invite 1 million folks to look at this porn web site. I could get rich and buy my own Caribbean island.

What a racket! Are we investing all those billions in the Internet to carry this garbage?

It all hit very close to home a few weeks ago when a spammer compromised a customer email server and used it to relay spam messages across the Internet and disguise his identity. It turns out this is easy to do. After all, it's just a series of SMTP commands to specify the sender and recipient list, and anyone with a working knowledge of SMTP could build a crude email client to send the appropriate commands. Armed with such a

program or the appropriate know-how, a spammer can route email to an end user through an intermediate site and remain anonymous.

From the spammer's point of view, this is great. Somebody else's email server does all the work, and the headers for the zillions of messages that go out point right back to the compromised server, not the spammer. So when somebody complains, the customer with the compromised server takes the heat and, once the customer fixes the compromised server, the spammer is free to plunder somebody else.

Microsoft Exchange is configured by default to allow rerouting for POP3 and IMAP4 clients. This means a bad guy could send unwanted solicitations to a million email addresses and route those solicitations through such servers exposed to the Internet. Microsoft knowledge base articles Q193922 and Q196626 describe how to restrict such routing with Microsoft Exchange V5.5, Service Pack 1 or later, and how to turn it off. The key is in the routing tab of the property sheet for the Internet Mail Connector.

It seems to me that all corporate email servers exposed to the Internet should turn this off. After all, what useful purpose does it serve in a corporate environment? Public email servers, such as Prodigy, AOL, and others have a problem – how do they provide service and block spam?

How do others in the community feel about this? Let's come up with a way to get rid of this crap. Send me your thoughts and I'll put together a future column based on your ideas. Let's make spam mean Spam again.