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PERSONAL TECHNOLOGY

By WALTER S. MOSSBERG

Mailblocks Will Keep Your Mail Spam-Free, Without the Guesswork

Most antispam programs take the form of add-ons to your normal e-mail program or service. And most rely on filtering, the effort to guess, usually imperfectly, which e-mails you receive are spam and which are legitimate.

But I've been testing an antispam system that takes a better approach. It's a complete e-mail service that has antispam intelligence built right in. Instead of filtering, it uses a far more effective method that stops 100% of mass-mailed spam.

The program is called Mailblocks, and despite a few downsides, I like it a lot. It's aimed at consumers and small businesses, and doesn't work with corporate e-mail. But it has lots of sophisticated features, and can consolidate all of your e-mail accounts -- even AOL accounts -- into a single in-box.

Mailblocks is a Web-based e-mail service, like Yahoo Mail or Hotmail, that works on both Windows and Macintosh computers. But it is slicker and cleaner than Yahoo or Hotmail, with a very good, uncluttered interface that responds to commands quickly. If you'd rather use a traditional e-mail program, you can read Mailblocks e-mail using Outlook, Outlook Express or Eudora on Windows, or Apple Mail or Entourage on the Macintosh.

The service is inexpensive. A free version, which has ads, gives you five megabytes of message storage and a Mailblocks e-mail address. For $9.95 a year -- that's a year, not a month -- you get 15 megabytes of storage, an ad-free screen, a Mailblocks e-mail address and the power to consolidate other e-mail accounts. For $24.95 a year, you get all of that and 100 megabytes of storage. On Hotmail or Yahoo, 100 megabytes of storage costs more than twice as much, and you get less effective spam protection and have to look at ads. Yahoo and Hotmail, however, have more features.

MOSSBERG'S MAILBOX

Walter S. Mossberg **answers readers' questions**[2] about computers and technology.

ABOUT WALT MOSSBERG

Walt Mossberg is the author and creator of the weekly Personal Technology column in The Wall Street Journal, which has appeared every Thursday since 1991. The goal of the column is "to take the consumer's side in the struggle to master the machine, to deliver a weekly dose of useful information in plain English, but in a way that never condescends to our readers just because they can't tell one chip from another."

Mr. Mossberg also writes the Mossberg Solution, which premiered April 9, 2002, and Mossberg's Mailbox. He is also a contributing editor of Smart Money, the Journal's monthly magazine, where he writes the Mossberg Report column. On television, Mr. Mossberg appears frequently as a technology commentator for the CNBC network.

Mr. Mossberg has been a reporter and editor at the Journal since 1970. He is based in the Journal's Washington, D.C., office, where he spent 18 years covering national and international affairs before turning his attention to technology.

DOW JONES REPRINTS

Mailblocks also allows you to send e-mail attachments of up to six megabytes each, a generous limit that's enough for multiple high-resolution photos. And if you don't like having the clumsy word "mailblocks.com" in your e-mail address, you can choose from 19 alternatives, including "mailster.com," and "emailwhiz.com."

You can divert e-mail from up to 10 of your current e-mail accounts to Mailblocks, and Mailblocks will apply its antispam system to all, including popular services like EarthLink, AOL, MSN, Yahoo Mail and Hotmail. You can also import address books from Outlook or Outlook Express and other programs, though you may have to go through several steps to do so.

Mailblocks uses a spam-control system called challenge/response. It's designed to stop all e-mail from the automated mass-mailing programs spammers use, while letting in e-mail from humans. Mailblocks isn't the first program to use challenge/response, but it does a very nice job with it. Here's how the system works.

All e-mail you receive from people in your address book is passed directly to your Mailblocks in-box. If any are sent to you from addresses not in your address book, they are met by an automatically generated "challenge" e-mail that asks the sender to copy a randomly generated number into a box. These E-mails aren't placed in your in-box, but go into a special Pending folder while awaiting a response.

If the sender copies the number correctly, the e-mail is moved to your in-box, and the address is added to your address book. Mailblocks will

also add the sender to a master list, so he or she will never be challenged again when sending e-mail to any other Mailblocks user.

If the sender doesn't respond correctly to the challenge within 14 days, the e-mail will be deleted from the Pending folder.

All automated spam systems will fail this test, either because they can't stop and copy the number, or because they use false return addresses. Only human senders with genuine return addresses can pass the challenge.

If you don't want to subject unknown senders to the challenge, you can turn this feature off, but then you will get spam.

To receive "good" automated e-mail, such as online newsletters or purchase confirmations, Mailblocks lets users create special "tracker" e-mail addresses that can be used to sign up for various Web stores or services. When an automated mailing system sends an e-mail to one of your tracker addresses, it goes right to your in-box.

In my tests, these features worked perfectly, eliminating spam from my Mailblocks account and from those accounts consolidated inside Mailblocks.

Mailblocks also offers advanced e-mail features like automatic signatures, multiple folders, rules for sorting e-mail and automated vacation messages.

But there are some downsides. It doesn't scan e-mail attachments for viruses. It lacks a "preview pane," so you can see what's in a message without opening it. It can't auto-complete e-mail addresses you start to type in. And there's no easy way to designate an entire domain -- a whole company, for instance -- as immune from challenges. The company says it plans to remedy some of these shortcomings in a new release due this summer that will also include a calendar function.

Overall, Mailblocks is a very good system for eliminating spam. And it will only get better.

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