



CyberSpeak
Edward C. Baig

Mailblocks could help end the spam jam

Can't anybody stop spam? I wish I had a nickel for every time I've heard that from a friend, colleague, reader or member of my family.

All of us whose livelihoods and passions depend on a regular exchange of e-mail can relate. The spam scourge is out of control and getting worse. (**Related item:** [Junk stops here.](#))

My inbox probably looks a lot like yours. I've been offered debt relief, diets, diplomas, drugs, dates with sexy and promiscuous babes, stock tips, extra traffic for the Web site I do not have, schemes to make a quick and easy buck, and several methods — how to put this delicately? — to bolster my manhood.

So when somebody promises to eliminate 100% of spam mail — yes, the whole enchilada — I'm skeptical but willing to check it out.

That somebody is WebTV co-founder Phil Goldman, now CEO of Web-based e-mail service Mailblocks. Goldman says Mailblocks will be demonstrably better than such competitors as MSN Hotmail and Yahoo Mail, in the same way that Google emerged as a superior search engine.

Fast out of the blocks

He's off to an impressive start. The Mailblocks screen is clutter-free and loads pretty fast even at 56K. Pricing is reasonable. For a modest \$9.95 a year, you get an account allowing a generous 12 MB of storage and up to 6MB of attachments; under a current promotion you get an extra two years of service. A \$24.95 annual subscription gives you 50MB of storage.

The bottom line

Mailblocks
www.mailblocks.com

\$9.95 a year (with current promotion offering two extra years) to \$24.95 a year for an account with extra storage.

★★★★ out of four

Pro: Web-based e-mail service does an excellent job of taming spam. Clean interface, generous storage, inexpensive.

Con: Had a few "false positive" spam messages in my pending folder. Some senders may be put off by challenge-response system. Not yet offering contact manager, calendar and some basic e-mail features.

As with any Web-based e-mail service, you can compose and access messages from anywhere you are connected to the Net. You can also get your Mailblocks mail inside Outlook, Outlook Express and Eudora, or access e-mail addresses you usually get through those programs and feed them through Mailblocks.

Most critically, in about three weeks of testing, I didn't receive a single piece of spam.

Now you might think that's because spammers haven't "found" my new account yet. Until this column, the ebaig@mailblocks.com address has not been published anywhere. But my Yahoo, AOL and MSN addresses aren't published either, and those accounts are overloaded with spam.

In any case, now that my Mailblocks account is out front and center, I encourage all spammers to come and get me. Meanwhile, I've been trying to invite trouble by signing up at sweepstakes and online gambling sites with my Mailblocks address. Spam is still at bay.

Mailblocks lets you access existing e-mail addresses from up to three external accounts. Thus, I was able to weed out spam forwarded from AOL, Yahoo and Hotmail by viewing their messages through Mailblocks. Setting up external accounts is a breeze; you merely provide Mailblocks with the user names and passwords.

'Challenging' the sender

Obviously, lots of companies with a vested interest are targeting spam as Public Enemy No. 1, from online giants such as AOL and MSN to upstarts barely on the radar screen. There are also measures consumers can

take (see accompanying story.) But so long as the epidemic persists, I will periodically revisit the topic and evaluate anti-spam efforts.

The basis of Mailblocks' system is a "challenge response," which simply means writers must confirm who they are before their messages are passed through. Just about all unsolicited commercial e-mail is generated and transmitted by machine. To prove that a message was dispatched by a human being, Mailblocks automatically sends mail directing the correspondent to a Web page with a seven-digit number and instructing him or her to type it into a text box, a task that would be ignored by computer. If the sender doesn't respond within two weeks, the message is deleted. (Mailblocks sends frequent reminders.)

This could be a minor nuisance for the people you want to hear from; I suppose a prospective employer or an important client might be put off. But Mailblocks sends the polite confirmation message right away and in your name, with the sender's own message pasted in the body. So unless the sender signed off the computer immediately after hitting the send button, odds are he will respond.

A folder for pending posts

About the only mildly objectionable (if understandable) item in the Mailblocks confirmation message is the marketing plug asking senders to try the service themselves. But it's not exactly spam.

Fortunately, once senders have been confirmed, they need not repeat the process again. Moreover, if these folks already reside in the Mailblocks address book, or if you send mail to them first, they also need not jump through the hoops.

Mail that hasn't been authorized, whether sent by machine or person, goes into a "pending" folder for the two-week period, so you might want to pore through it for any false positives. My pending folder contained a few legit messages from friends and others that were originally sent to AOL. But you can set it up so that Mailblocks can import addresses from your AOL (or other) address books, or from sent e-mails on those accounts. You can also set it up so that your AOL mail would be deleted inside AOL once transferred to Mailblocks. And if you do reply to an AOL message inside Mailblocks, the message the recipient gets will show the mail coming from Mailblocks, not AOL.

Mailblocks is fine for stopping unwanted bulk e-mail, but what about creepy people who might send you personal mail? They can type in a seven-digit number, after all. Fact is, Mailblocks doesn't do much good against the cyber-equivalent of a heavy breather. As Goldman acknowledges, "we stop spammers, not stalkers." Fortunately, you can block senders by placing them on a blacklist.

On the other hand, you probably get legitimate bulk mail generated by computer, perhaps automated receipts for the stuff you buy online, or financial newsletters. Mailblocks lets you create up to five "trackers," or aliases, that enable you to supply them with an address that bypasses the mail controls. For example, instead of becoming a member at Amazon, say, with ebaig@mailblocks.com, I'd instead use a "tracker" address such as ebaig+ecommercexxx@mailblocks.com, with the xxx representing a PIN number.

Having just come out of the chute, Mailblocks isn't yet as fully featured as some other services. Among the future enhancements on the company's (and my) wish list are a contact manager, integrated calendar, and virus and spell checkers.

Then again, by putting the kibosh on spam, Mailblocks has done an admirable job nailing the most important feature of all.

Personal tech runs Wednesdays. E-mail: ebaig@usatoday.com

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