

FTC FACTS for Consumers

You've Got Spam: How to "Can" Unwanted Email



Do you receive lots of junk email messages from people you don't know? It's no surprise if you do. As more people use email, marketers are increasingly using email messages to pitch their products and services. Some consumers find unsolicited commercial email — also known as “spam” — annoying and time consuming; others have lost money to bogus offers that arrived in their email in-box.

Typically, an email spammer buys a list of email addresses from a list broker, who compiles it by “harvesting” addresses from the Internet. If your email address appears in a newsgroup posting, on a website, in a chat room, or in an online service's membership directory, it may find its way onto these lists. The marketer then uses special software that can send hundreds of thousands — even millions — of email messages to the addresses at the click of a mouse.



How Can I Reduce the Amount of Spam that I Receive?

Try not to display your email address in public. That includes newsgroup postings, chat rooms, websites or in an online service's membership directory. You may want to opt out of member directories for your online services; spammers may use them to harvest addresses.

Check the privacy policy when you submit your address to a website. See if it allows the company to sell your address. You may want to opt out of this provision, if possible, or not submit your address at all to websites that won't protect it.

Read and understand the entire form before you transmit personal information through a website. Some websites allow you to opt out of receiving email from their "partners" — but you may have to **uncheck** a preselected box if you want to opt out.

Decide if you want to use two email addresses — one for personal messages and one for newsgroups and chat rooms. You also might consider using a disposable email address service that creates a separate email address that forwards to your permanent account. If one of the disposable addresses begins to receive spam, you can shut it off without affecting your permanent address.

Use a unique email address. Your choice of email addresses may affect the amount of spam you receive. Spammers use "dictionary attacks" to sort through possible name combinations at large ISPs or email services, hoping to find a valid address. Thus, a common name such as *jdoe* may get more spam than a more unique name like *jd51x02oe*. Of course, there is a downside — it's harder to remember an unusual email address.

Use an email filter. Check your email account to see if it provides a tool to filter out potential spam or a way to channel spam into a bulk email folder.

You might want to consider these options when you're choosing which Internet Service Provider (ISP) to use.



What Can I Do With the Spam in my In-Box?

Report it to the Federal Trade Commission (FTC). Send a copy of unwanted or deceptive messages to spam@uce.gov. The FTC uses the unsolicited emails stored in this database to pursue law enforcement actions against people who send deceptive spam email.

Let the FTC know if a "remove me" request is not honored. If you want to complain about a removal link that doesn't work or not being able to unsubscribe from a list, you can fill out the FTC's online complaint form at www.ftc.gov. Your complaint will be added to the FTC's Consumer Sentinel database and made available to hundreds of law enforcement and consumer protection agencies.

Whenever you complain about spam, it's important to include the full email header. The information in the header makes it possible for consumer protection agencies to follow up on your complaint.

Send a copy of the spam to your ISP's abuse desk. Often the email address is abuse@yourispname.com or postmaster@yourispname.com. By doing this, you can let the ISP know about the spam problem on their system and help them to stop it in the future. Make sure to include a copy of the spam, along with the full email header. At the top of the message, state that you're complaining about being spammed.

Complain to the sender's ISP. Most ISPs want to cut off spammers who abuse their system. Again, make sure to include a copy of the message and header information and state that you're complaining about spam.



How Can I Avoid Spam Scams?

The FTC suggests that you treat commercial email solicitations the same way you would treat an unsolicited telemarketing sales call. Don't believe promises from strangers. Greet money making opportunities that arrive at your in box with skepticism. Most of the time, these are old fashioned scams delivered via the newest technology.

Here are some of the most common scam offers likely to arrive by email:

- **Chain letters.** Chain letters that involve money or valuable items and promise big returns are illegal. If you start one or send one on, you are breaking the law. Chances are you will receive little or no money back on your "investment." Despite the claims, a chain letter will never make you rich. For more information on chain emails, check out www.ftc.gov/chainmail.
- **Work-At-Home Schemes.** Not all work at home opportunities deliver on their promises. Many ads omit the fact that you may have to work many hours without pay. Or they don't disclose all the costs you will have to pay. Countless work at home schemes require you to spend your own money to place newspaper ads; make photocopies; or buy the envelopes, paper, stamps, and other supplies or equipment you need to do the job. The companies sponsoring the ads also may demand that you pay for instructions or "tutorial" software. Consumers deceived by these ads have lost thousands of dollars, in addition to their time and energy.
- **Weight Loss Claims.** Programs or products that promote easy or effortless long term weight loss don't work. Taking off weight, and keeping it off, requires exercise and permanent changes in your diet. All the testimonials and guarantees in your email are not worth the space they take up on your hard drive.
- **Credit Repair Offers.** Ignore offers to erase accurate negative information from your credit record. There's no legal way to do that.
- **Advance Fee Loan Scams.** Be wary of promises to provide a loan for a fee, regardless of your past credit history. Remember, legitimate banks don't issue credit cards without first checking your credit.
- **Adult Entertainment.** You may get an email from an adult entertainment site that claims to offer content for "free" and doesn't require a credit card number for access. All you have to do is download a "viewer" or "dialer" program. However, once the program is downloaded onto your computer, it may disconnect your Internet connection and reconnect to an international long distance phone number, at rates between \$2 and \$7 a minute. Be skeptical when you see opportunities to view "free" content on the web.

For More Information

The FTC works for the consumer to prevent fraudulent, deceptive, and unfair business practices in the marketplace and to provide information to help consumers spot, stop, and avoid them. To file a complaint or to get free information on consumer issues, visit www.ftc.gov or call toll-free, 1-877-FTC-HELP (1-877-382-4357); TTY: 1-866-653-4261. The FTC enters Internet, telemarketing, identity theft, and other fraud-related complaints into Consumer Sentinel, a secure, online database available to hundreds of civil and criminal law enforcement agencies in the U.S. and abroad.

Facts for Consumers

FEDERAL TRADE COMMISSION	1-877-FTC-HELP
WWW.FTC.GOV	FOR THE CONSUMER

Federal Trade Commission
Bureau of Consumer Protection
Office of Consumer and Business Education

April 2002