



Explaining the Spam Problem to Marketers

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Direct marketers aren't dumb. But many of them have a great deal of trouble understanding the reasons that marketing by e-mail is different from marketing through older media. Why? Because they don't know what they don't know. Marketers read the same news reports we do, and I expect that most of them say "wow, all that porn spam is awful. I sure am glad we don't send any of that stuff."

The problem is that there are obvious analogies from mail and phone marketing that are totally wrong, and it takes a fair amount of sophistication both to understand that they're wrong and what the implications are.

To point out a few big ones:

- The costs of email are mostly paid by the recipient. No matter how much the marketer has spent to put together its campaign, it's still less than the recipients will spend to receive the mail.
- There are no master address databases. There is a master list of every mailing address in the U.S. kept by the Post Office, and a master list of every phone prefix in the U.S. kept by an organization called NANPA. This makes it possible to clean lists reliably, so that recipients don't get multiple copies. When someone asks to be removed from a list, he really is taken off the list. There's no e-mail equivalent and can't be, since each Internet domain maintains its own set of mailboxes, with no way for outsiders to know what addresses are valid.
- Addresses are not people. In the postal world, most people have one address, a few have two (PO Box and street address, or maybe winter and summer), nobody has three. Few people have more than one or two phone numbers, particularly if you leave out cell numbers which are poison to marketers anyway. But in e-mail land, there can easily be a gazillion addresses that are one person, or one address that is a gazillion people. This is one of the reasons that opt-out can't work, because you will be asking some people to opt out thousands times. This isn't just a problem for technically savvy people who run their own domains; consider anyone whose network uses an LDAP directory server that can deliver mail to johnsmith, john.smith, john.q.smith, jsmith, and j.smith all to the same place.
- Networks are not common carriers. The Post Office and phone companies have to deliver all traffic that's paid for, give or take some fringe issues like pander lists (lists of people who've complained that a sender's mail is offensive). Network operators can do whatever they please with their traffic, subject only to contracts with their customers and peers. No matter how much a customer pays

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an ISP, they've only paid to get their traffic to a peering point between the sender's and recipient's networks, not to the recipient. This means that recipient networks can and do block mail, and the sender's only recourse is to convince the recipients that it's in their interest to accept the mail.

That's a start. I think if you talked to most marketers, it'd be rare to find that they really understood even two of these four points. And that's not because they're stupid, it's because they don't realize that techniques that have worked elsewhere for a century don't work here. So we have to help them learn.