

Timothy Perrin



Stop that Spam!

Finally! Spam filter software that works. I thought the day would never arrive.

“Spam,” as you probably know, is computerese for unsolicited commercial email—that endless stream of solicitations to buy Viagra, get a cheaper mortgage, repair your damaged credit, or experience cyber bliss with some electronic hussy.

A company called Cloudmark, Inc. has come up with a product known as SpamNet, which harnesses the power of the Internet to rather effectively block unwanted email. The text of each email is turned into a unique many-digit number as it arrives, then the email is compared against Cloudmark’s extensive database to see if it is spam. If it is, it is shuffled into a special folder where you can quickly double-check it later, just to make sure nothing important was accidentally caught in the trap.

What makes SpamNet unique is the fact that it does not rely on one or two people attempting to create a set of filters to catch everything. Rather, each SpamNet user contributes to the whole. For example, whenever a piece of spam slips through the filter into my inbox, I merely click on a button marked “Block” to notify the database that this particular email is junk.

To make sure I’m not maliciously sending legitimate material to email hell, my block message is really just a vote to

the system; Cloudmark’s system compares my votes to those of other SpamNet users to see how “reliable” I am. Slowly, the longer I’m on the system, the more it sees my choices as being reliable, and thus the more weight the system gives my votes.

If, on the other hand, something legitimate accidentally gets tagged as spam, another button, labelled “Unblock,” will allow that message through in the future.

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So, as soon as the latest and greatest spam offering appears on the Internet, it almost instantly starts showing up in the SpamNet database. As reports flood in, the cooperative SpamNet system realizes this particular message is a real problem and starts blocking it.

The one problem with SpamNet is that it only works with Microsoft Outlook 2002/XP. The product is free for end-users

like you and me. You can download it from <http://www.Cloudmark.com>. I recommend it.

Other anti-spam choices out there seem to be getting better, as well. *Wall Street Journal* Personal Technology columnist Walter S. Mossberg raves about a program called **ChoiceMail**. This program operates from the presumption that all email is spam unless you have approved the sender. Anyone sending you an email is offered a chance to “register”; you are then given the opportunity to approve that registration.

Automated spam robots will, of course, never reply to the invitation to register so a new-sender registration will always come from a real human being. You can automatically preregister everyone in your address book or any other addresses such as email lists from which you regularly receive mail. A 14-day trial version is available from the company’s Website at <http://www.digiportal.com>. If you like it and want to buy it, it’s US\$29.95.

I’ve also tried a product called **Mailbox Filter**, which operates in a similar fashion. It puts anything not from someone on your email list, or a list of other senders you have approved, into a folder labelled “Probable Spam.” Unfortunately, I found it hard to use and difficult to set up. It also required that I run it each time I wanted to collect

email, disabling my automatic email retrieval. Nice idea. Poor execution. It's available for a 30-day free trial at <http://www.mailboxfilter.com>. If you decide you want to buy it, it's US\$67.

MailWasher takes yet another tack, allowing you to preview your email while it's still on your ISP's server. That way you can block potentially dangerous attachments before they even get to your computer, "bounce" emails back to the sender making a spam robot think your email address doesn't work, and, as a last line of defence, it offers filtering. MailWasher is free but it will cost you US\$20 if you want support. You can get it from <http://www.MailWasher.net>.

Equipment: should you try an all-in-one unit?

A recent trend in office automation has been the all-in-one unit that combines a printer, scanner, copier, and fax machine into a single desktop "appliance."

There are advantages and disadvantages to this approach.

Chief among the advantages is, of course, recovered desk real estate. In the space where you now have just your copier, you'll also have your printer, fax machine, and scanner. You also need buy only one set of inkjet cartridges and one kind of paper.

On the downside, if this thing breaks, you're really out of business! Not just one function is impaired—four of your office functions are out of commission. That said, when was the last time you actually had a machine go down for any significant period of time? And, if any office machine is crucial to your operation, you should have a redundant backup machine available, even if it is, for example, an old dot-matrix printer that can substitute for your laser machine while it's in the shop.

The all-in-one product category has a wide variety of available choices. In its lineup, Hewlett-Packard has nine-colour/inkjet all-in-one offerings, six black-and-white laser units, and one pricey colour laser machine. Lexmark offers a

total of 10 all-in-one machines. Other manufacturers in the market include Canon and Brother. You can spend anything from just over \$200 (a small inkjet desktop unit, suitable for a small office or home office) to almost \$29,000 (45 pages per minute, up to 45 users, stapling, collating, etc.). Prices depend on resolution, speed, and paper handling.

Ironically, colour units are generally cheaper than black-and-white since colour machines run on inexpensive inkjet technology. As with all inkjet machines, the real expense is in the operating costs, not the capital costs. (Colour laser machines are available, but at the top end of the price range.)

Over the last few weeks, I've had an opportunity to work with one of Hewlett-Packard's all-in-one machines: the \$800 OfficeJet d-135. This machine is about the size of a small photocopier (55.6 x 41.4 x 33.8 cm.), has a legal-size scanner/copier bed, and can optionally handle double-sided printing or copying.

Print quality—both as a printer and as a copier—was excellent. It was particularly nice to copy in colour and receive high-quality reproductions.

This particular machine, at least as configured, would not be suitable for a busy office because of the small paper tray. It can only take 150 sheets at a time; you'd virtually have to detail one staff member to do nothing but refill it all day.

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I also was unable to get the automatic document feeder on the scanner/copier bed to work correctly. In fact, I could not get it to work at all. To make matters worse, when I opened the top of the machine to photocopy, the automatic document feeder fell onto the floor.

All that said, my wife and I both wiped away tears when the UPS guy came to take it back to HP. Despite its shortcomings, it was an impressive machine, one that was certainly proof of the concept for us, and for a small home office such as we run, more than adequate. You would likely want a slightly upscale model with better paper handling.

If you don't need the colour, I'd recommend going with the lower operating costs of a laser unit. They are priced competitively with the inkjet models and you don't have to shell out \$75 for a colour inkjet cartridge every week. ▲

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