

Timothy Perrin

Solving email Problems

The local CBC morning show announced a new email address today.

Throwing away an otherwise perfectly good email address was the only way to avoid the hundreds of unsolicited emails they were receiving each day—spams.

Not 10 minutes after the announcement, the CBC host revealed the show had received its first message at the new address—an offer to participate in the exciting investment opportunities available in Nigeria Viagra.

According to the former CEO of a top anti-spam company, almost two-thirds of all email is spam. Enrique Salem was the boss at Brightmail Inc. before it was gobbled up by Symantec Corporation last June. In a January 2004 interview with the Reuters news agency, Salem said spam was making up about 60 percent of all email and expected that number to peak at about 65 percent in late 2004. After that, he expected to see a gradual decline as new anti-spam laws begin to take hold.

For example, on November 3, 2004, two people in Virginia were convicted of spamming under a new state law that makes hiding the return address of an

email or sending mass mailings a felony in that state. One of them was sentenced to nine years in prison. Because up to 80 percent of all North American Internet traffic passes through Virginia, the state law may have a serious deterrent effect.

In the meantime, we're going to continue to face a flood of offers for cheap drugs, pirated software, easy money, and easier women.

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I've written about anti-spam software in this space before. The trick is finding the balance between thoroughness and a low number of false positives—legitimate messages that get tagged as spam. You can choose from a variety of good products that do a decent job.

But there are a number of steps you can take to reduce your chances of ending up on spam mailing lists to begin with.

Never Put Your Address on the Web

First and most important, never let your email address appear on the World Wide Web. Spammers use Web-crawlers—

programs that follow every link on the Web—to search for email addresses. If your address is out there, they'll find it.

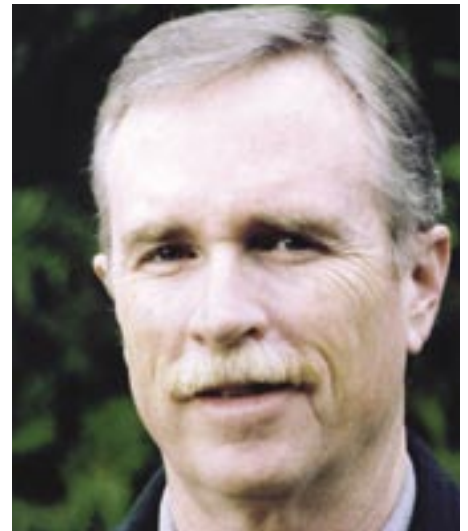
First, do a search at Google.com to find out if your email address is on the Web anywhere other than your own Website. Where does it show up? For BC Notaries, likely spots would be directory sites like The Society's Website or a discussion forum where you unwisely used your email address in your posting.

If the site is outside your control, all you can do is contact the site's owner and ask him or her to remove your address. I have a listing on the Writers.ca Website. I just don't list my email address. The phone still works. If someone needs me, they can call.

Hiding Your email Address on Your Own Website

Web crawlers find email addresses by reading through the HTML code that programs each Web page. They look for either the command "<mail to:" or simply the @ sign. You can fool them in a variety of ways but they all require a degree of technical expertise.

The easiest thing to do is replace the active link on your Website—the "click here to contact me" feature—with a graphic. For example, on my Web page, www.TimPerrin.com, when you see my



email address, you are not seeing text, you are seeing a picture of text, like this:

email:Tim@TimPerrin.com

That is actually a graphic created in Adobe Photoshop Elements. It is not text. A Web crawler cannot read a graphic, but a person can.

Until yesterday, all I had on my Website was that graphic. If you wanted to reach me, you had to type my email address into the “To:” box by hand. (Gasp! Horrors!) But in the course of researching this article, I came across a variety of ways you can still include a link that allows a person browsing your Website to click and open up a message addressed to you.

Unfortunately, they are complex and require knowledge of HTML or Java Script, two languages used to program Web pages. To oversimplify the methods, you represent your address with a series of numbers, rather than letters.

If you are adventurous and want to try some of these methods yourself, do a Google search for the phrase “hiding email addresses.” You will get dozens of hits. Or ask your IT consultant for help.

Starting from Scratch

But let’s say your email address has already been damaged beyond repair, the barbarians are at the gates, and the gates are down. What can you do to protect your *next* email address?

Own Your Own Domain

The first step is to take control of your own email address by owning your own domain. Just as I own TimPerrin.com (and TimothyPerrin.com, WritingSchool.com, and a few others), you can own any domain you like, as long as no one else already has it tied up.

Websites like NameSecure.com and WebServe.ca offer domain registration, Web hosting, and email packages for very reasonable amounts—less than \$100 a year. Then you can set up and delete mailboxes as you need them.

Forwarding Services

Alternatively, you can have one “public” email address that redirects your mail to your *real* email address. For example, when

you send me mail at Tim@TimPerrin.com, it is really going to a mailbox @shaw.ca. I pay NameSecure.com to redirect my email. That way, whenever I change my ISP (Internet service provider) or my underlying email address changes for any reason, the one *you* see stays the same.

Many universities are now offering their alumni free forwarding services. I have an address provided by UVic, for example, that I give out only to family and friends.

Use Temporary Addresses for Junk Mail

Next, never—*ever*—give your real email address to a Website without carefully reading the site’s privacy policy. Even then, I’m extremely reluctant to give my address to a strange company.

Instead, I set up temporary addresses from time to time. Shaw Cable gives me six addresses as part of my high-speed service, so I use one of them as a temporary address, changing it every few months. I don’t check it from my email program on my computer, only from Shaw’s Webmail service, and then only occasionally.

Alternatively, I’ll set up a free email account with Hotmail, Yahoo, or Juno for a specific purpose. Among other things, I can immediately see if a particular Website is selling my address.

That’s it for now. I’ve got to go. I have to write my new business partner in Nigeria who is going to pay me several million dollars to help him transfer money he doesn’t own out of the country. It’s all very legal, he assures me. The money belonged to a man who died intestate and it will just go to the government if we don’t take it. All I have to do is give him my bank account information so he can send me all that cash . . . ▲

Timothy Perrin, a former lawyer, is a technology writer for a variety of magazines. He teaches writing in the Professional Writing program at Okanagan University College in Kelowna; online for the Community College of Southern Nevada; and through his own school, WritingSchool.com.

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