SoHo E-spirin E-zine
brought to you by
Funai Pty Ltd
IT Handyman Services
For Small Office/Home Office and Small Business. IT Tips & Tricks.

How to Decoy Spam Away from your Email Address

by Allan Naguit – March 2005

Spam. Junk email. We all get bombarded, some more than others. Spam makes us waste our precious time cleaning out our inboxes. Apart from the annoyance of having to read yet another email enticing us to grow body parts, lose weight, or get instant doctorates, there's also the fear that some of this spam might be somehow infecting our machines with some computer virus.

So, how did they get my email address in the first place? What can I do to cut down on SPAM?

Let's have a look.

How did they (spammers) get my email address in the first place?

There are many ways spammers can get your email address. These are typical ways:

- ✗ **Your email address is posted on your personal or business website.** Spammers have tools to "harvest" email addresses from websites.
- ✗ **You signed up to receive email from a company whose privacy policy is weak, or the company is "dodgy" to begin with.** Dodgy companies include porn sites, online gambling sites and some greeting card sites. Unethical companies might sell your details to spammers.
- ✗ **You posted to an online forum and left your email address.** Again, your email is available to be harvested by spammers.
- ✗ **Spammers guessed your email address.** This isn't particularly hard to do, especially if your email address is simple e.g., **johnsmith**@yourcompany'sname.com).
- ✗ **A company that has your email address got hacked and their data stolen – including your email address.** They may have had your email address because you bought something from them at some point and you had to supply your email address.
- ✗ **Some other person, possibly a friend, signed you up for something or gave your email address away.** This could be due to ignorance on their part, or they were "attacked" via "social engineering" - where they were somehow pressured or tricked into giving away too much personal information.

What can I do to cut down on spam?

Knowing some of the ways spammers can get your email address, you can then make an effort to avoid giving it to them in the first place. Note that this article talks about prevention, not the cure. Remember,

Take care when giving out your email address.

But there are many occasions when you **need** to give a valid email address to someone you don't know. Note that I said a **valid email address**, which is not necessarily the same as your main email address.

The tools below allow you to give out a valid email address and receive email (usually, to complete some kind of transaction), yet decoy spam away from your main email address. They work somewhat differently from each other, so look for the best fit for you. By the way, these tools are FREE!

The Tools:

1. **SpamHole**
2. **Spamgourmet**
3. **Mailinator**
4. **Yahoo! AddressGuard**

Spam Hole .com

"Two hour email addresses. No logins required. Spam dies here." (http://www.spamhole.com)

How it Works:

1. **Set up a spamhole email account.** Go to their website. Specify the name of your spamhole email account (e.g., johnsmith@spamhole.com).
2. **Specify the "forward to" email account** for email you receive at your spamhole account. For example, you may decide that any email sent to johnsmith@spamhole.com should automatically forward to your main email account johnsmith@yourcompany'sname.com.
3. **Specify for how long you want your spamhole account to remain active.** At time of writing, this can range from 1 to 72 hours.
4. **Confirm your account.** You'll have to go through a quick confirmation step where you receive an email from SpamHole then you respond and confirm your request for a spamhole account.

Once your spamhole account is created, it remains active for the number of hours you specified. You can give this spamhole email out as needed, and receive emails to that account. All emails will be automatically forwarded to your main email account until the spamhole account expires. Once it expires, the spamhole account disappears, so there's no chance of getting any (more) spam from that account. It's gone! If you need another spamhole account, just create another one.

spamgourmet -

"free disposable email addresses, strong spam blocking, short learning curve" (http://www.spamgourmet.com)

Spamgoumet is similar to **SpamhOle** in that you set up a user account with **spamgourmet**. You also specify your main email account which they refer to as the "protected address". When it's time to give out an email address which you think may be exposed to spam, you give what they call a "self-destructing disposable email address", in the form of:

someword.x.user@spamgourmet.com

I'll excerpt from their website to explain how it works:

"*someword* is a word you have never used before, *x* is the number of email messages you want to receive at this address (up to 20), and *user* is your username. For example, if your user name is "spamcowboy", and BigCorp wants you to give them your email address (on the web, on the phone, at a store - it doesn't matter), instead of giving them your protected address, give them this one:

frombigcorp.3.spamcowboy@spamgourmet.com

This disposable email address will be created here *the first time BigCorp uses it* (you don't have to do anything to create it), and you'll receive at most 3 messages, forwarded to your protected address. The rest will be indelicately consumed."

When I set up and tested my **spamgourmet** account (username of **allantest**), I decided to send to **rubbish** and set the number (x) to **1**. That is, I sent a test "spam email" to rubbish.1.allantest@spamgourmet.com).
I received the email at my protected address. I sent another test email to the "rubbish" address, but this second one never arrived at my protected address. When I went back to the **spamgourment** website and logged onto my account, my message stats read like this:

"Your message stats: 1 forwarded, 1 eaten. You have 1 disposable address(es)."

As expected, my second test (spam) email ended up being "eaten". Nice.

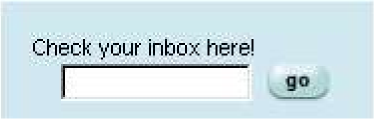
Mailinator™ It's like super-instant, always-ready, any-email-you-want email. right now.

Mailinator – (www.mailinator.com) This one works differently from the two methods mentioned above. With this one, when it's time to give out an email address, you can make up an email username on the spot (up to 15 characters) then end it with "@mailinator.com". For example, I might give out the email address "johnsmith@mailinator.com". This email address is created (if it doesn't already exist) as soon as anyone sends an email to it.

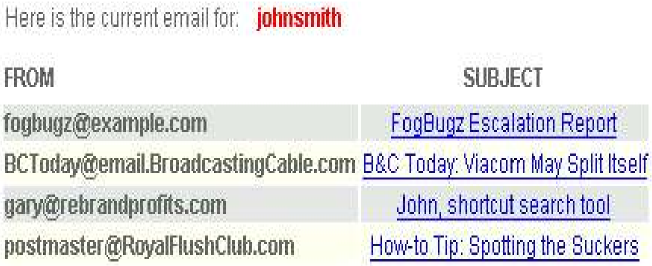
To read email sent to johnsmith@mailinator.com, I'd need to go to the Mailinator website: www.mailinator.com. (By the way, this turns into http://www.mailinater.com/mailinator/Welcome.do when you go to the website.)

If you go to the Mailinator website, you'll see a little box on the left with "Check your inbox here!"

To check the inbox for johnsmith@mailinator.com, I'd enter "johnsmith" and click on "go".



Now, here's something to keep in mind with Mailinator: since you can make up an email address on the spot, it's quite feasible that someone else has already thought of it. There's no privacy. At time of writing, I found out that the johnsmith address already existed and had four emails in the inbox:



Here is the current email for: johnsmith

FROM	SUBJECT
fogbugz@example.com	FogBugz Escalation Report
BCToday@email.BroadcastingCable.com	B&C Today: Viacom May Split Itself
gary@rebrandprofits.com	John, shortcut search tool
postmaster@RoyalFlushClub.com	How-to Tip: Spotting the Suckers

Anyone can check the "johnsmith" inbox and read the emails (as I did). So for your own use, the trick is to come up with unique Mailinator email names, and to avoid using the Mailinator method where privacy is paramount. Keeping these things in mind, Mailinator still provides a very handy service and helps protect your main email account by giving you the option to give something other than your real email address.

Technical note: Some clever person has come up with a little program that allows you to get your Mailinator mail on your computer without needing to manually log onto the Mailinator website. It's called **Nator** and it can be downloaded from http://pipasoft.com/nator/. As per their website, "Nator is a utility that makes use of http://www.mailinator.com. It can grab email from Mailinator.com and mail it to your home email address and it can also create random usernames and monitor those for you."

Yahoo! AddressGuard – This is for people with Yahoo! email accounts. I know this works for accounts that end with "@yahoo.com.au", in particular.

The **Yahoo! AddressGuard**, is one of the **Mail Options**. It allows you to create decoy email addresses, called "disposable email addresses", all of which automatically forward to your main Yahoo! account. You can give out and expose these disposable email addresses to the possibility of spam. Once one does start to attract spam, you can delete that disposable email without affecting your main Yahoo! account.

Yahoo! provides an informative and user-friendly AddressGuard Tour (Flash-based animation) that explains how the whole thing works and the steps involved, but in summary, the steps are:

1. **Create a Base Name** (e.g., myownemail)

2. **Create a disposable email address(es) using a specific keyword**
   You might create two addresses,
   myownemail-**ecards**@yahoo.com.au
   for signing up with greeting card websites, and
   myownemail-**forum**@yahoo.com.au,
   for registering to online forums.
   Both of these accounts would forward any email received to your main Yahoo! email account.
3. **Delete a disposable address when it starts receiving spam.**
   If myownemail-**ecards**@yahoo.com.au were to start attracting too much spam, you can delete that without affecting your main Yahoo! account.

But what about a CURE for spam?

As for the ultimate solution to spam, this is a problem for greater minds to grapple with. Meanwhile, the battle against spam continues.

However, one way to cut down on spam **you're already getting** is to use an email program that has built-in spam filtering. Using online email clients (like when you log in to Yahoo! or Hotmail) gives you access to their built-in spam/junk mail filtering. Alternatively, you can use something like **Mozilla Thunderbird** – it's similar to Outlook/Outlook Express but has built-in Junk Mail filtering. Personally, I use Mozilla Thunderbird and am happy with how it filters spam. It's a free download from http://www.mozilla.org/products/thunderbird.

Final Notes: How's my own spam situation? Tolerable!

I find that I use the Yahoo! AddressGuard method the most whenever I have to give out a valid email address.

I use **Mozilla Thunderbird** and manage six different "main" email accounts directly from within it –including a Yahoo! account that has twelve disposable addresses attached to it– bringing the total number of different email accounts I manage to **18**!

Yet, by being very wary of giving out my main email addresses and following my own advice, I'm managing to keep my spam levels down. Yesterday, for example, I received a total of **four** spam emails. And today, only one so far, and it's already 4 pm. Not bad at all considering the number of email accounts I have. And all spam emails were correctly identified by **Mozilla Thunderbird** as junk and each was automatically thrown into the Junk folder of the account that received it. So, I never even had to look at my spam. But I did have a quick look, both to make sure Thunderbird classified them correctly (it had, as per usual), and also out of sick, morbid curiosity.

Now, if only I could reduce the number of "valid" emails I get per day, life would be much easier!

Allan Naguit is an I.T. Consultant for Funai Pty Ltd, an outfit that provides "IT Handyman Services" for small businesses and SoHos based in the Sydney Metropolitan Area (Australia). This monthly e-zine is part of their services, giving ideas for curing IT headaches, and exposing people to their IT opportunities.

If you found this e-zine helpful go and subscribe!

Visit their website at www.funai.com.au.