

Do-It-Yourself Anti-Spam

By John Hart [19/03/2004]

Are you tired of hearing optimistic comments, such as "*remove 100% of spam*", that go overboard? Whilst there is some truth in these comments, it's only half the truth, which sometimes is more dangerous than a lie. For example, anyone can make a spam filter that catches 100% spam – mark everything as spam. Thus, one has to find the perfect balance between marking spam emails as spam (avoiding *false negatives*) and not marking valid emails as spam (avoiding *false positives*).

As one can imagine, this system is nowhere near perfect. And with the amount of spam emails expected to rise, your email address is at risk.

Prevention is better than cure

There is good news for you, however. Instead of taking the approach of filtering out and removing spam from your email, you can take the approach of assuming that every email is going to be spam.

There are challenge response (verification) anti-spam services out there that work. These send an email back to the sender with a question that only an intelligent receiver is able to reply to (e.g.: "How many dogs appear in this picture?" underneath a picture with 3 dogs), and here is where the machines would fail. However, whilst this system might work sometimes, it all ends up making your email communication dramatically slow (especially if you get a lot of emails from people you don't know – for example the sales address of your company). What if it is a mailing list sending you out an email, or a webboard informing you that someone has responded to your post? Sure, these emails would be caught and placed in quarantine – but this only adds to the slowing down of your emails.

A cheap solution

There is one cheap way to control your email. Imagine giving everyone a unique email address, and if they ever spam you, you block that email address altogether, or even better make it forward emails back to them!

1) To start off, you will need a domain name. I would suggest registering a domain name just for this purpose even if you already own one. You can get domains from as cheap as \$5.95 a year ([IWantIt](#)). You are free to register your domain from anywhere. One good thing to look out for would be if they also offer you free email forwarding (the more accounts the merrier) with a catch-all email account.

Note: If your host doesn't provide you with email forwarding, don't worry. As long as you can change your nameservers (DNS hosts), there are companies that offer free DNS hosting with free unlimited email forwarding. One such company is [MyDomain](#), which also offers domain registration.

2) You need an email address; preferably this would be some email address which you never gave to anyone. You can create a free Hotmail account for example. Alternatively, you can use your current email address and set your mail client to move emails to a certain domain to a different folder. For example, if your domain name is youcannotspam.us, set a filter to move anything with @youcannotspam.us to some folder (figure 1)

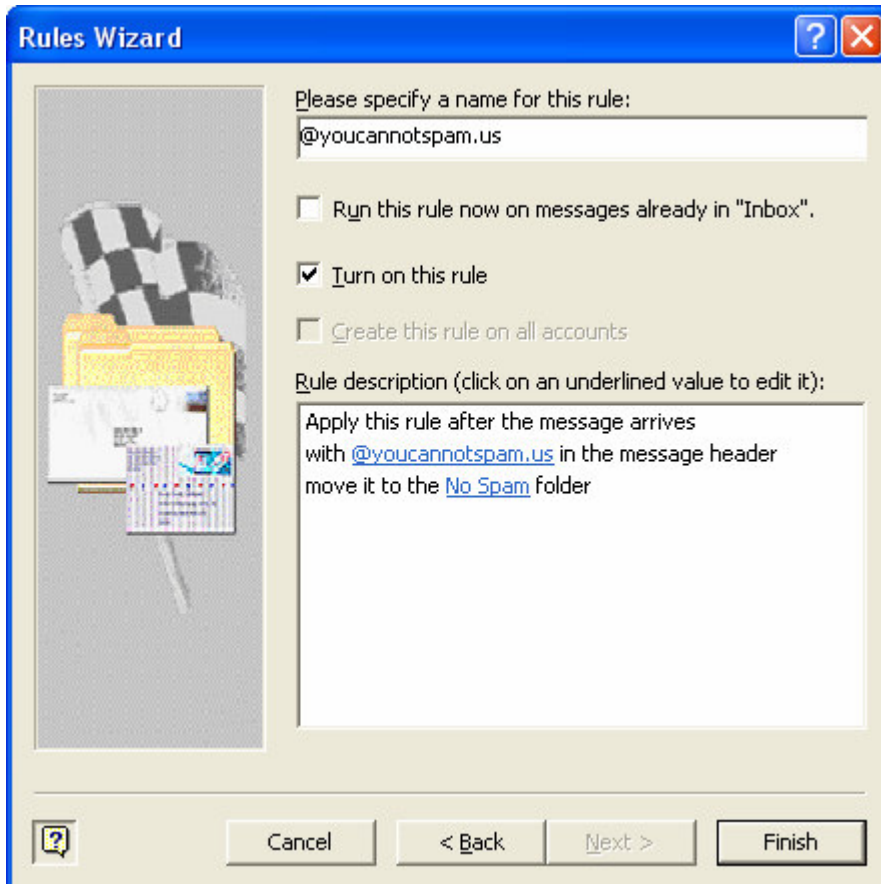


Figure 1 – Creating a rule to move emails to a new folder

3) If you completed step 1, you should have a catch-all email address set up. Log in to your account and set it to move/forward all emails to the email address you chose in step 2.

4) You can now start giving your email address to anyone. You had to register for a site called ThrowingStones? Give them the email address throwingstones@youcannotspam.us.

What to do when you get spammed

Like it or not, you are still going to get spammed this way. But once you do, you can make sure it doesn't happen again! Let's say ThrowingStones sold their email address list to some company selling Viagra.

This leaves you with three options to do:

- never receive any email to throwingstones@youcannotspam.us
- move all emails to throwingstones@youcannotspam.us to another email address or folder
- live with it.

If you decide you don't want to receive any more emails to that email address, you should decide whether the spamming part was their fault or not. For example, if you registered for a webboard, this usually advertises your email address, and allows email harvesters (spambots) to harvest it. Since this is commonplace with webboards, you can't really blame them for it. If you feel that they were to blame, you can get your revenge by setting the email address to forward back to them, or if you're scared that would piss them off you can forward them to some email address that doesn't exist, such as fmhusihf@vmiuvh7e8h8.net.

To do this, you login to your domain account and set a new email forwarding entry and tell the system to forward throwingstones@youcannotspam.us to the email address you want it to forward to.

If you think you might receive some mail from ThrowingStones that would be useful, you would not want to do this. So you can either set a filter in your email client to forward all email to throwingstones@youcannotspam.us to some new folder (similar to figure one) or else create an email address for this purpose – an email address where you get spammed. You can also use some anti-spam software here, since many emails coming in here would be spam.

What do you do when you don't know which email they spammed? If you are BCCed, your mail client usually does not show to which email address the email got sent. However, you can look this up in the message header.

If you have Outlook, double click on the email to open it up in a new window and then click on View from the menubar and choose Options (figure 2). Scroll around the message header and you should see your email address laying around somewhere.

What do you do when you get emailed to some email address you never gave to anyone? One good reason why I suggested registering a new domain in step 1 is that some spammers get domain names and stick a username to it. contact@youcannotspam.us, info@youcannotspam.us and admin@youcannotspam.us will likely get spammed, so it's recommended that you keep these email addresses on block. If you get emailed anywhere else and you never gave out that email address, put it on block too.

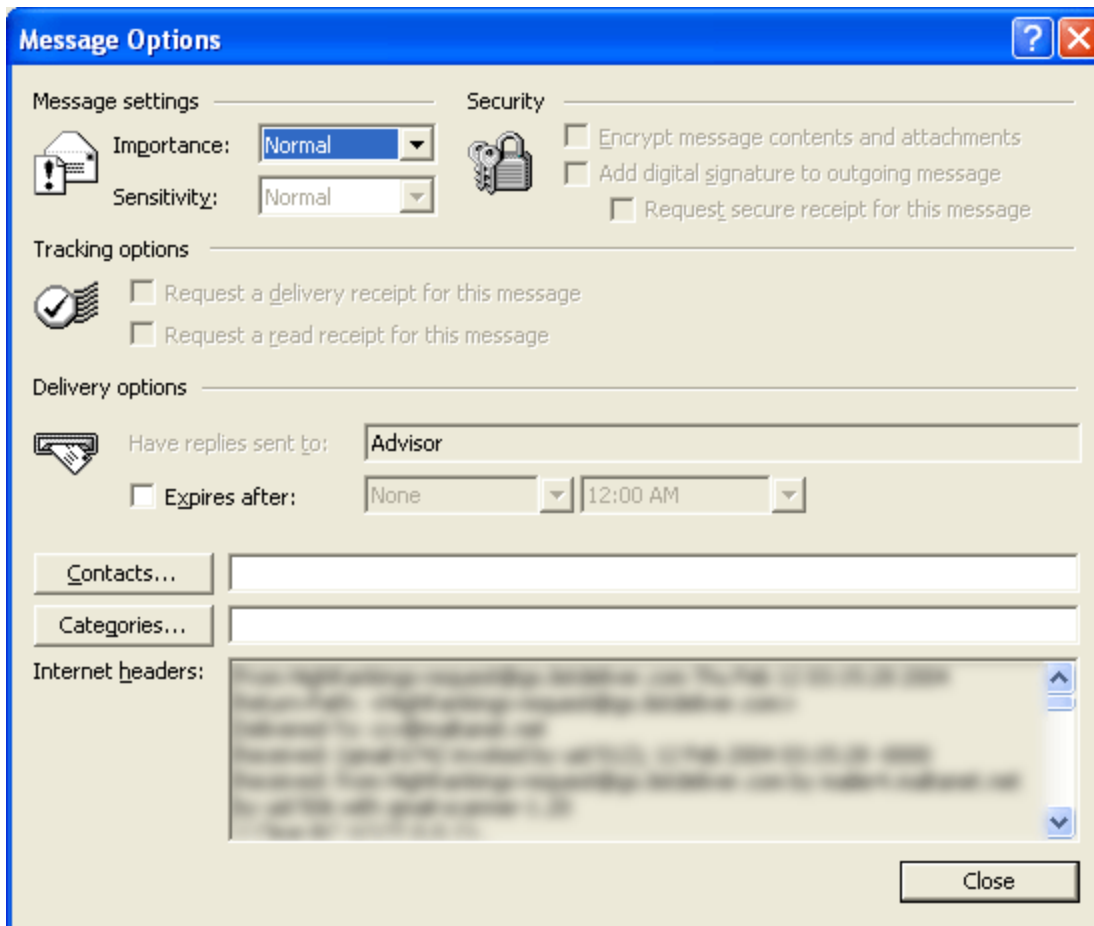


Figure 2 – Outlook's Message Options

You are in control

With this system in place, you are in control of what goes in your mailbox; you are preventing continuous spamming. Like all other systems, this is never going to be 100% foolproof, but it's pretty close. If you see that the inflow of spam is getting out of hand (it shouldn't, unless you're giving out a lot of different email addresses), you can always put up some anti-spam software and then once a week you could go through your quarantine and add email addresses to the forwarding lists.