

Recommended Rules of Conduct for Sending Mass or Bulk Email Messages

By Walter Robinson II, November 30, 1998
Courtesy of Last Chance Ministries (www.lastchanceministries.com)

A. NOT TO OFFEND OR ACCUSE, BUT TO INFORM AND EQUIP

This document has been prepared and sent to various people on my email list to hopefully inform and equip Christians about the practice of bulk email mailings.

Please understand this first, receiving this document does not necessarily mean that I consider any particular individual as an offender. It merely means that I believe some MAY share some of my sentiments and concerns about a practice that seems to be getting more and more out of hand as time goes by. At the very least, having this document will hopefully enable some to respond graciously to those from whom they regularly received unsolicited email.

B. THE INTERNET; THE BENEFIT, BLESSING, AND THE COST

As a Christian and a full time Christian worker (Missionary Church planter and pastor in the Caribbean) I am thankful for having access to the Internet. The wealth of available information helps me to readily gather information on a vast number of topics, including; Bible study, ancient religious practices, cults, current issues and news events, consumer and product availability and service information, needed computer information, and also creating and maintaining web page ministries. But I am even more thankful for the 'privilege' of being able to readily communicate with loved ones, friends, and businesses in a quick and economical manner. Such communication includes Internet Phone and VideoPhone that costs very little or nothing more than mere connect time for us in our location! By using Internet communications we pay a fraction of what long distance telephone service would cost us. The communication aspect of the Internet alone makes it absolutely necessary for us to keep Internet access.

But even with above-mentioned savings, access to the Internet in my location is still relatively expensive. In the US one may shop around and find reliable Internet Service Providers (ISPs) that offer 'unlimited time' usage for less than \$10.00 to \$20.00 (US) per month. There are even some 'free Internet' ISPs available for many areas. But currently, unlimited service is not even available to us at any cost! We pay about \$1.00 (US) per hour for our basic access. Thus, those of us who fall into this category have to be wise stewards with our Internet time online.

Overseas ISPs that are available to missionaries in smaller developing countries often do not offer unlimited service as this time. Thus, they charge for any time online, regardless of what the missionaries are doing. Performing web searches for research, downloading files, Internet phone and video phone communications, and exchanging email, all cost the same per minute online. Receiving 'unsolicited' and 'unneeded' email helps to run up the

bill. Thus most missionaries without unlimited service strive to use the Internet to correspond on a needed basis with those with whom they regularly communicate.

C. WHAT IS UNSOLICITED AND UNNEEDED?

Missionaries often receive email that may be deemed to be: cute, humorous, and informative about various issues that are dear to many (even to me at times), and even considering Christ honoring or glorifying. However all can be considered to be 'unsolicited' email if they do not meet any individual addressee's daily 'need to know' and correspondence needs. This may also include messages that ask you check out a new web page that is also deemed to be any of the above.

The issue is not whether the material is worthy of being read, because often times such is worthy of reading. But it is largely an issue of cost.

Those without unlimited service pay for every byte that passes over the telephone line, through their modem, and ultimately finds a temporary dwelling place on their hard drive. Unlike junk mail received through the local post office that can be readily dumped in the trash and costs nothing to discard, unsolicited email costs as much to receive as welcome email does. Also, one can usually tell what kind of message they have received by looking closely at the envelope, the return address, and the way the addressee is addressed. But it is more difficult to determine the same information about unsolicited email unless the 'FROM' address is readily recognizable or the wording in the 'subject line' of the header is clear about what the overall message is about.

Thus, cost is a major factor that makes unneeded email unattractive and even burdensome at times. However, there is another reason that applies to everyone--whether they have unlimited service or not.

D. PRIORITIZING

The other prohibitive reason for sending unsolicited email is consideration for each individual's available time to read it. Regardless of how biblical, edifying, encouraging, humorous, and informative each message may be, each of us only has an 'X' amount of time to read them. Most people who send bulk email messages either do not consider this, or they believe their message is special and an exception should be made on the part of each who receives it to read it.

Most of us could handle one or two messages a day like this. But unfortunately it is often much more than one or two people a day who do so--and more are joining the ranks each day. Senders often seem to believe their web page, their jokes, their anecdotes, their political perspectives, their gripes, and their issues are worthy of being read and considered by all who happens to be in their address book--and even more.

But no matter how much merit each message contains, few individuals--if any--can afford to sit for hours in front of a computer and read message after message that does not

relate directly to their daily 'need to know' and correspondence needs. At the risk of being misunderstood, most Christians cannot even read the Bible for six hours everyday and practice what the Bible teaches at the same time. If this is the case with the most relevant book in the world, we must realize that our own messages have even less priority with others--regardless of how nice we think it would be for others to read them. Each individual must decide what is 'necessary' reading, and what is 'nice' optional reading for when they have extra time on hand.

There are numerous search engines on the World Wide Web. Most people who have access to the Internet know how to use these tools to find what they want. In many cases they may already be aware of some of the information others may be eager to share. But by the same token, even though others may be aware of the information, they may have deemed it unnecessary reading for their own personal use. Each individual should respect the rights of others to do so.

E. WHEN BULK EMAIL IS NOT APPROPRIATE

I am fully aware that occasions could arise in which bulk emailings are needed, appropriate, and acceptable to individuals. One case is when an individual has expressed a desire to a specific individual or organization to be placed on their regular bulk email list. Another is when someone else has accurately related another individual's expressed interest or willingness to be placed on particular types of bulk email listings. Lastly, some people correspond with others on a personal regular basis, and from time to time they may wish to send out a bulk letter concerning their personal activities to friends and relatives that are interested and pray regularly for them. In most cases this also seems appropriate. However, if one does not exchange personal letters from time to time with an individual, it is probably inappropriate to send a bulk form letter about personal matters, unless the individual has expressed a desire to remain informed of your activities.

There may be other instances where bulk email listings are acceptable that I have not thought of here. But in each case the acceptance is based upon each individual's expressed willingness to receive such messages. It should never be assumed that an individual would accept unsolicited messages without knowing of their expressed willingness to do so **BEFOREHAND**. In cases where one is not sure, the intended recipient should always be contacted on an individual basis and asked if they wish to receive such mailings. This is similar to someone ringing a doorbell or knocking on a door to ask permission to enter a house and present a product or perspective. It is never polite to enter without being invited inside. The same goes for email. Typical Junk mail can be tossed in the trash at your local post office unopened. Email goes directly into each recipient's dwelling or place of business. And again, many times the recipient pays for the time to download each individual message, whether they read it or not.

F. FORWARDING EMAIL

Some people have a practice of 'FORWARDING' email on to many in their address book. This especially applies to pithy sayings, political pros and cons, anecdotes, moving

spiritual stories, etc. But these can also fall into the classification of being ‘unsolicited’ and should be handled and considered as such. Remember, what is noteworthy and interesting to you may not be to others. And even if it is interesting to others, they simply may not have the time to read it.

G. HOW TO DO IT--IF YOU MUST

Having said all the above, the fact remains that some may persist to send unsolicited bulk emailings for a number of reasons--some valid and some not. In such cases there are some things a person can do to lessen the possible offensiveness of their activities.

First, NEVER send bulk mailing out to multiple recipients using the ‘TO,’ ‘COPY TO,’ or ‘CC’ option! I cannot stress this enough! When you use this method to place bulk emails on the Internet you are in effect sending each of your listed recipients’ addresses to everyone on the list. This gives each individual on the list the name and email address of all the others! This is much like advertising your friends’ and neighbors’ names and telephone numbers to those who do not know them. Sending bulk email using this option makes it possible for everyone on the ‘TO,’ ‘CC,’ or ‘COPY’ list to place all the other individuals’ addresses on their mailing list so they can also send them bulk email messages. This only promotes more and more unsolicited email distribution, and the problem increases on an exponential scale with each incident.

In addition, some individuals who get their names on CC or COPY lists are unscrupulous people. Such can use newly harvested names that are attached to the heading of bulk emailings to promote any number of activities ranging from pornography, get rich quick schemes, religious perspectives that are offensive to one’s own personal spiritual perspectives, and even hate groups. That is why many people, including me, abhor seeing their names on CC and COPY lists that head bulk emailings.

If a person insists on issuing unsolicited bulk emailings, they should instead use the ‘Bcc’ or ‘Mailing List Suppressed’ option. This makes it possible to send bulk emailings to any number of individuals one may choose, but only each individual recipient’s name and address will appear in the heading. All others on the list will be stripped away. So if one feels they must send bulk emailings, please exercise the consideration to use this option. If you do not know how to invoke this method with your email software, I suggest that you refrain from sending out any bulk emailings until you learn how to do so. You do not have the right to pass other people’s email address on to whom ever you wish. Getting another person’s email address carries the responsibility of protecting that person’s right to privacy and their privilege to send and receive email.

H. THE THREAT TO A GOOD THING

In some cases the proliferation of unsolicited email can get so bad that some individuals have to go through the trouble (and often the expense) of changing their email address. In other cases some people get so weary of having to wade through unsolicited email that they stop using it altogether. Needless to say, the more people have email--and the more

they check and read their email on a regular basis--the better the world wide email system gets and the more benefits we can all enjoy.

Because the problem of unsolicited email is getting so bad, many individuals and ISPs are beginning to implement the use of software that is designed to filter out Internet 'Spam.' This software can be programmed to respond to incoming email messages depending upon certain criteria that is found in a message's heading. I am no expert on this, but I suspect that the filtering software could be trained to look for specified domains of origin that are known to act as gateways to the Internet by Spammers. The software may also be programmed to filter out specific email 'FROM' addresses or even certain characteristics that are found in message headers about the originators. I suspect that some such software can even be programmed to reject messages that come in with 'CC' lists beyond a certain size, or completely reject messages that come in with 'Bcc' or 'Mailing List Suppressed' tags in the header.

Thus, if an individual frequently sends out unsolicited bulk emailings they could one day find their email 'undeliverable' to some ISPs and individuals because their email address has been listed among those to be screened out. In the end, sending unsolicited email hurts us all and it mars the marvelous tool of email correspondence.

CLOSING COMMENT

It is my hope that this document will help us all to be better informed on Internet email exchange and usage. This is obviously only my personal observation and recommendations that are designed to help us each police our behavior on sending email. I fear that the abusers of the email system may eventually result in the necessity of governing authorities having to step in and regulate the system to control unsolicited bulk emailings and Spam.

In some cases I could envision an ISP levying a surcharge to those who send email messages that have headers with CC, COPY, Bcc, or Recipient List Suppressed tags in them. Perhaps the extra charge could be used to offset and reimburse the cost incurred by others to download their bulk emails. But regardless, such fees would surely cut down on the propagation of unsolicited email.

In either case, the Internet email system as it is works pretty good. I would hate to see someone have to 'fix' it because a few abuse the system--either unwittingly through ignorance or as a direct result of purposeful planning. But such intervention is likely just what will happen if those of us who use the system do not police ourselves.

Feel free to copy and distribute this article as needed.

Walter Robinson II