

Dear Sir,

I refer to your article "IDA defends opt-out scheme to curb spam" (ST 16 July). As someone who runs a small-time web hosting business, I cannot help but disagree with IDA's view regarding its opt-out policy, which presumably supports legitimate companies sending e-mail to prospective clients.

After having used the same e-mail address for the past 4 years, the amount of spam I receive in my mailbox has increased tremendously. Before my company implemented aggressive anti-spam filtering mechanisms recently, I received up to 200 spam messages daily, more than half of which arrived in my mailbox in the wee hours of the morning. With our filtering tools enabled, spam has been reduced by about 70-80%, but at the risk of blocking the occasional legitimate e-mail.

An opt-out policy proposed by the IDA would certainly fall on deaf ears. According to Spamhaus (<http://www.spamhaus.org>), an anti-spam organization which publishes public lists of spam sources, the United States is ranked the top country for spamming. While it is important to protect the interests of companies within Singapore, we need to recognize that the majority of spam comes from outside the country. Thus, while Singaporean companies are generally well-behaved in sending unsolicited e-mail, the unfortunate reality is that the rest of the world is not. Furthermore, when spamming organizations from outside the country offer illegitimate opt-out links, our consumers unwillingly become recipients of even more spam. The result is that an opt-out policy will only embolden illegal spamming organizations, while crowding out legitimate marketing e-mail from being read by consumers. Consumers will not know who to trust, and legislation will be rendered useless.

Prior to implementing our anti-spam policy, some of our subscribers specifically asked us to reduce the amount of spam arriving in their mailbox. The only way we could do this was to configure our mail servers to filter e-mail based on stringent checks, which had an economic impact on us as well. Our servers take longer to process e-mail to filter spam, and the risk of filtering out legitimate e-mail continues to haunt us. Unfortunately through e-mail, firms have been able to pass the cost of marketing directly to consumers with negligible cost. For consumers to have to manually delete spam imposes an economic cost on both service providers and consumers.

I believe that part of the reason why only a slight majority find spam a small problem is because service providers have so far been reasonably successful in filtering spam from their mailboxes. Free e-mail providers such as Hotmail and Yahoo were once a hotbed for spam, but have been forced to take extra measures to ensure a spam-free environment for their users. The fight against spam has resulted in something like an arms race, where service providers try to find new means to filter spam while spamming organizations discover new exploits to perpetuate their mail. If such a trend continues to go on unchecked, e-mail would gradually become crippled. The fact that some ISPs are now charging for anti-spam filtering shows how alarming the problem has become.

Hence, I feel that e-mail marketing should only be allowed on an opt-in basis. This

will ensure that legislation is capable of prosecuting organizations that focus on spamming activities, and at the same time ensure that legitimate marketing messages that are useful for consumers will continue to be delivered, without having to compete with unwanted spam for attention. We cannot take the lead of countries such as the United States, which has legitimized opt-out marketing and unwittingly become the largest source of spam.

It is only when we have effective legislation to prosecute firms who cross the line by sending massive amounts of spam that we can build a more robust system for dealing with whether a company has the right to send e-mail to prospective clients. Anti-spam legislation should be able to take a hard-line approach in dealing with organizations whose spamming activities cripple ISPs and floods consumers' e-mail accounts, while taking a light-touch approach to firms that send out the occasional e-mail flyer. There comes a point when the volume of marketing e-mail crosses from informative to downright frustrating, and these lines need to be clearly defined, preferably by consumers who have opted to receive marketing e-mail instead.

Regards,

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