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Spam-a-lot

How businesses are handling unwanted e-mails

JARED FAVOLE | CONTRIBUTOR

Glenda LeGendre is sick of e-mail.

More specifically, the vice president of marketing at Villa Julie College is sick of irrelevant, electronic sales pitches and the misinterpretation that goes along with her own instant messages to others. "I'm at the point where I'm telling people not to e-mail, just call," LeGendre says.

E-mail, once the darling of the working world, is experiencing a backlash of sorts. Some businesspeople are doing more to wipe out unwanted, electronic messages — known as spam — that distract them and cut into their valuable work day. Others are simply backing off this efficient yet impersonal form of communication. And a few are sticking by e-mail, even though they admit it can

be an incredible time waster.

Villa Julie College, for one, had a huge spam problem. Of the nearly 2.3 million e-mails that came to the college's server in January, about 1.7 million were spam. The college now spends \$6,000 annually on spam software. Spam has become nearly a full-time job for Steve Morrill, the college's senior systems administrator.

Morrill says the college's software allows him to deliver an e-mail to faculty and students with Villa Julie College e-mail addresses, showing them what the spam software blocked. Villa Julie College isn't alone. As many as two out of three e-mails to businesses are spam, according to research by Wellesley, Mass.-based Nucleus Research, which queried 849 e-mail users in March.

The survey also found that people spend 16 seconds identifying and deleting each spam e-mail, which translates into about \$70 billion in costs annually to all U.S. businesses or \$712 for each employee in lost worker productivity.

For Aegis Title Associates LLC, a Glen Burnie-based real estate title services company, spam was also a problem. The nine-person company was getting lots of spam advertising pornography and pharmaceutical drugs, owner Debi Smigovsky Grim says. Including spam, Grim says she gets about 250 to 300 e-mails each day. Yet, e-mail is essential to her business because having clients fax loan packages would take too much time and drive up expenses.

A few months ago, Grim realized she was a slave to e-mail and was spending more than a half hour deleting spam each morning. She wanted to wean herself off of e-mail so decided to come up with a policy: She turned off an alert that emitted a small beep through her speakers each time an e-mail came in, and promised herself she would only check e-mail once an hour.

Grim hasn't made her personal policy company-wide and admits that she checks her e-mail more frequently than once an hour when she's expecting something from a client.

Staying 'tethered'

For the law firm Saul Ewing LLP, e-mail is a matter of business. "Clients really appreciate the fact that we're tethered," says Scott D. Patterson, a partner at the law firm and chair of its technol-

ogy committee.

The businessman says he's been at numerous conferences and board meetings where he hears a low hum created by lawyers using their BlackBerrys to respond to e-mails. Though the law firm gives its lawyers a \$500 stipend every two years to use on electronics, including laptops and BlackBerrys, the company stresses that employees should use their own judgment about when it's appropriate to check e-mail, Patterson says.

It's known that lawyers work long hours and need time to concentrate on cases. E-mail has the tendency to put lawyers in "a constant attention deficit," says Ruth Fry, office manager of Saul Ewing's Baltimore office.

While some clients appreciate the immediate responses through e-mails, others demand it. David Taub, who co-runs

the Canton-based Web marketing firm Round 2 Communications with partner Matt Goddard, "lives and dies" by e-mail. Taub said he constantly e-mails with clients and admits that the first thing he does in the morning is check his e-mail.

Creating relationships

Networking at conferences, shaking hands and talking face to face have the potential to create business relationships that last a lifetime.

E-mail, however, doesn't create lasting business relationships, said Oliver Schlake, an Innovation in Entrepreneurship and E-Business teaching fellow at the University of Maryland, College Park. People can't tell anything about you through e-mail, because there's no way to translate tone or mood, Schlake said. Without those things, misinterpretations appear frequently. LeGendre couldn't agree more, calling e-mail the "epitome of laziness."