

Why is it Called Spam?

© 2003 Teasley – www.teasley.net
Using Data to Optimize Your Marketing

A little tidbit of information for you.... It will not improve your marketing to know why “spam” is called “spam”, but it always seems to be interesting to people.

Why is Spam Called Spam?

The term has to do with the famous “Spam” sketch performed by England’s Monty Python comedy troupe. In the sketch, two patrons visit a restaurant that serves almost nothing but Spam. The waitress goes on and on about their menu which contains “Spam and eggs, Spam on toast...” etc..

I Don’t Get It

Well, it happened like this:

What’s a Usenet Group?

One of the first useful “applications” of the Internet was (and still is) the “Usenet” newsgroups. These are a series of bulletin boards/message groups, each of which is dedicated to a specific topic. Originally the topics were very technically and scientifically focused, with groups focused on topics such as the C++ computer programming language, or engineering topics. Since the first computers connected via the “Arpanet” (a pre-cursor to the “internet”) belonged to defense department contractors and major universities, the technical groups were (and still are) a hotbed of technical information exchange.

Soon, Usenet groups focused on other topics began to appear. “Recreational” groups focused on topics like humor, skiing, and parachuting. The use of the Internet was expanding – and so was the number of users.

Ok, so?

At that time the Internet was used primarily by males – certainly more so than by females. The engineers at the aerospace and computer companies using the Internet, as well as the users at major universities were mostly male – AND many of them happened to be fans of television shows like Star Trek and Monty Python.

If you happen to know serious computer/Monty Python fans, you know they are prone to repeating lines from Monty Python shows and movies. Lines such as, “...What is the

airspeed of an un-laden swallow?” (from “Monty Python and the Holy Grail”) provoke knowing giggles of laughter amongst Monty Python aficionados. Because of this, it was not surprising to see Monty Python lines to start showing up with more and more frequency in the newsgroups. Lines from the “Spam” sketch were among the lines that showed up.

Some people used the term “spam” to refer to useless pieces of computer code, or messages posted in the Usenet groups that were of no value. On occasion someone would post something that was of little or no value (or even if it was of some value) it would be followed by a responding post that went something along the lines of, “Spam, spam, spam... wonderful spam!”

When the infamous “Green Card Lawyer” posting occurred in 1994, it was the beginning of the end of a large portion of the Usenet groups. A couple of lawyers realized they could post their message about an upcoming U.S. Green Card lottery on all of the Usenet groups. So they did. It was the first mass commercial “spam” type posting on the Usenet. Many people responded to that posting with a “Spam, spam!” type reply.

“Spam” then became the term used to describe this type of annoying post. When email became more prevalent and people began using email for commercial reasons, the term was applied to the annoying emails you do not ask for, but often receive.

Where are the Usenet Groups Now?

Sadly, because of the “spam” type of postings (including millions of “Make Money Fast!” type postings that followed the “Green Card Lawyer” posts) many of the Usenet groups were ruined. However, many of the original “core” newsgroups still remain and some are even still thriving. The administration of the Usenet groups has been taken over by Google (thank you, Google).

You can visit the Usenet news groups by going to www.google.com's main page and clicking on the “groups” tab (rather than the “web” tab, which is the default). The science groups (delineated with a prefix of “sci”) contain many of the original groups. The groups are all text-based (they originated before web “browsers” were invented and graphics on the internet became prevalent) so you will see messages only in text – but the wealth of information in the groups is amazing.