Taming the Spam Monster

Nobody likes spam, those pesky unwanted emails that flood your inbox, promising easy riches from Nigeria, the perfect partner from Russia, and that inside scoop on the hottest NASDAQ stock pick that is about to fly sky high. It's a worldwide electronic epidemic - it is estimated that 75% of all emails are spam!

Whenever you receive an email from a sender or subject line you don't recognise, delete it without opening it. I mean it – just delete it without opening it. It was not sent to you by a human, but by an automatic emailer program called a "spam-bot", so you won't hurt its feelings. These spam-bots run 24/7, mechanically spewing out spam to millions of email addresses they harvest automatically off website pages. If you do open one of them (or worse still click on "unsubscribe from this email") you just let the spam-bot know there is a real human reading this email address. Now your value as a "spam target" skyrockets up and you will get targeted much more aggressively! Even worse, many unsuspecting users have clicked on the links inside spam emails only to find their computers becoming infected with viruses, sometimes resulting in data loss and expensive reinstallation repair work.

Thankfully Outlook has a built-in folder called "Junk Email" that automatically scans your incoming email, and moves all suspected spam messages out of your Inbox and into the Junk Email folder. It is quite amazing how well it works. In the early days spam filters were very basic and would just look for keywords and phrases like "make money fast"," special offer"," guaranteed results", etc, but modern spam filters a very sophisticated and carefully analyse the entire content of the email, using impressive sounding techniques like "heuristics", "fuzzy logic" and "pattern analysis". If you were wondering exactly how the Outlook spam filter works, you're out of luck. Microsoft keep this a carefully guarded secret so the spam-bots don't find out and work around it!

Spammers get up to all sorts of tricks to try and fool the spam filter. For instance can you spot the difference between CUSTOMERSUPPORT@KIWIBANK.CO.NZ , CUSTOMERSUPPORT@KIWlBANK.CO.NZ and CUSTOMERSUPPORT@KIW1BANK.CO.NZ? At first glance we miss the difference between a capital I (for India), a lower-case l (for Lima), and 1 (the number one).

However, sometimes spam emails still manage to sneak through the spam filter and make it into your inbox. What should you do now?

If the email does not look familiar just hit delete. Easy.

If the email looks like a repeat of a spam message you have already been regularly deleting, you have two options depending on the version of Outlook you are using.

For the web-based version (via Office 365) you can help improve the accuracy of the Outlook Spam filter out by right-clicking on the email and selecting "Report as Junk" (or "Mark as Junk"). This sends a copy of the offending email back to the mother ship at Microsoft, who then endeavour to improve the spam filter to block emails like this in the future. "Report as Junk" is a great crowd-sourcing opportunity where we can all work together to help beat the spammers!

For the desktop version (Outlook 2013/2016), you can right-click on the message, then select Junk/Block Sender.

If you find you are still receiving too many spam messages in your Inbox, you have the option to increase the ferocity of the Outlook spam filter. The up side of this is you will see less spam in your inbox. The downside is an increased risk of "false positives", where genuine emails may be incorrectly moved to the Junk folder.

To change this setting, from Outlook click "Home" (in the top ribbon bar), Junk, Junk E-mail Options … On the "Options" Tab that is now displayed, you can change the level of junk email protection from "Low" (the default option) to "High".

On a final note, it's a good habit to scan through your Junk Folder every couple of days. If you spot an email that is not junk, right-click on that email and select "Junk/Not Junk" or "Mark as not Junk". This will move it back into your Inbox. Once you have scanned down all the Junk items, right-click the Junk Email Folder and select "Empty Folder or "Delete all".