

High spam levels choke business broadband

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Businesses experiencing long delays in receiving and sending e-mail messages may have an unexpected culprit to blame: spam.

The main reason spam, or junk e-mail, can take such a heavy toll on bandwidth is that the messages are "bursty" in nature, Rebecca Herson, senior marketing manager at anti-spam, anti-virus firm Commtouch, told UPI.

In other words, the messages "are coming in waves, not on a regular basis," Herson said. "You might get spam as 30 percent of your e-mail messages over the course of a few days, then none, and then another boom."

"On days when image-based spam achieves such a distribution peak, the global bandwidth and storage consumed by spam grows by more than 70 percent," Commtouch said in a company statement released last week.

And that 70 percent becomes bandwidth and storage that is not available to legitimate e-mail addresses and servers.

This becomes a problem for businesses, especially, because many medium to large enterprises save all e-mail messages on their servers, Herson said.

"Individuals can delete spam messages, but whether they stay on the server depends on the configuration -- whether the network backs up only user inboxes or every incoming message," she continued.

"There are companies that archive everything, to be on the safe side. Spam then takes up a huge amount of space."

Part of the reason for the recent jump in bandwidth and storage taken up by spam is the new trend of sending image-based spam, Herson said. These messages look like regular text but are actually much heavier images that are much harder for e-mail filters to catch.

"Image-based spam is three times the size of regular spam (that includes text and images), and much larger than spam that is purely textual," Herson said.

The image-based messages weigh in at around 18 kilobytes each, while the overall average for a standard spam message is around 5.5 kilobytes, Herson said.

CommTouch announced earlier this year that it had cracked imaged-based spamming, developing an algorithm to block it.

Despite the fact that at least 30 countries have enacted anti-spam legislation, the problem continues to grow and spammers continue to evade filters and law enforcement.

And unlike postal junk mailers, spammers encounter little to no cost while unloading cost in bandwidth, CPU processing time and storage space on the message receivers. Because of this, spamming could even be considered a form of theft, according to Wikipedia.

The United States Federal Trade Commission has a Web site dedicated to information on anti-spam laws and ways for consumers to protect themselves from receiving spam or falling for the scams the messages promote.

The scams can be anything from offers to make a killing on a penny-stock investment to advertisements for a wonder product. Some spam messages also include viruses, which turn an infected computer into a "zombie" -- a vehicle by which the spammers can send junk e-mail remotely from the infected computer without the user's knowledge.

In an increasingly electronic age, spam doesn't even have to be limited to e-mail: The unsolicited messages can also pop up on instant-messaging programs, Usenet news groups, Web search engines, blogs and cell-phone text messages. Though Commtouch's software and findings apply only to e-mail messages, a high volume of spam could suck enough bandwidth or storage space to slow any of these applications to a grinding halt.

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