

How to know when it's safe to click 'unsubscribe' on spam email

November 29 2017, by Jim Rossman, The Dallas Morning News



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I had a reader write in to ask about spam.

He wanted to know if using the unsubscribe link on spam emails was a good idea.

We've all received spam, and the eternal question is, "Do I click the unsubscribe link or not?"

In the old days, spammers made using email quite annoying. I know I still get way more spam than actual [messages](#).

In 2003, President George W. Bush signed a law called the CAN-SPAM Act. That stands for Controlling the Assault of Non-Solicited Pornography And Marketing. Sounds serious - and it is. The law aimed to help us reclaim our inboxes.

According to the Federal Trade Commission, here are the rules emailers need to follow:

- Don't use false or misleading header information.
- Don't use deceptive subject lines.
- Identify the message as an ad.
- Tell recipients where you're located.
- Tell recipients how to get out of receiving future email from you.

- Honor opt-out requests promptly.
- Monitor what others are doing on your behalf.

So all those things are pretty good, but the one we are interested in today is No. 6, which is also known as the unsubscribe link.

The good news is clicking unsubscribe works - if the sender isn't shady.

Wait. Isn't most spam sent by shady operators?

Yes, it is.

So I guess the lesson today is go ahead and click unsubscribe if you're reasonably sure the sender is legit, but I'm guessing those will be few and far between.

I use Google Mail, and it has a pretty aggressive spam filter. Sometimes I'll click on the spam folder and take a look at some of the messages. Some look like they come from actual companies, but others are quite obviously spammers.

Some of the spammers' messages have unsubscribe links, and some don't.

When in doubt, just ignore the spam. If they are shady, they may just be waiting for people like you to click on the unsubscribe link, which just serves to verify your email is active.

You should also take advantage of your email provider's spam filtering.

In my Google Mail account, I can highlight a suspect message and press a button to mark it as spam. Give that a try, and the messages should

start going directly to your [spam](#) folder.

If the messages just won't stop, you can always set up a filter to automatically move those messages to the trash. Look in your [email](#) settings for instructions on how to set up filtering. Of course, filtering only works if there is something common to search for in the messages.

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Citation: How to know when it's safe to click 'unsubscribe' on spam email (2017, November 29)
retrieved 10 April 2024 from

<https://phys.org/news/2017-11-safe-click-unsubscribe-spam-email.html>

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