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IMHBCO (In My humble But Correct Opinion) -- Vendors: How To Get Past My Spam Filters

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IMHBCO (In My Humble But Correct Opinion)

Vendors: How To Get Past My Spam Filters

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Baby deer are born with the ability to run. They learn at an early age how to detect threats in the forest around them, and they bolt immediately when they think they're in danger. Calves know instinctively that they should move to the shelter of the herd when a predator is near. There is a kind of fish that swims immediately into the safety of its mother's mouth when threatened. And anyone who uses email has, by now, learned that when you see a subject line that consists entirely of diacritical markings, or that invites you to painlessly enlarge or reduce one or more of your body parts, or that asks you to send your checking account number to a retired Nigerian diplomat so that he can share several million dollars with you, you'd better hit the delete key fast. In fact, it's probably smart to do so without even opening the message (let alone any attachments), since there's at least an even chance that if you open the message itself you'll be confronted with images that leave you unable to eat lunch or look your spouse in the eye for the rest of the week.

Over the last couple of years, we who are constant users of email have developed hair-trigger reflexes when it comes to spam. We're like young deer in the Internet forest. We've been burned once too often by what look, at first, like sincere invitations to international friendship or a smaller waistline or a PayPal account renewal, and we are now jumpy. Very jumpy.

And that's why I'm offering this public service announcement to all who correspond with librarians via email: if you want us to read your messages, then watch your subject headers.

Yesterday I received a message with the subject "Security Application." I didn't know the sender, so I deleted it immediately. Clearly, it was from some scam artist who was trolling for a sucker who had, say, recently applied for a job (and might be expecting a background check of some kind) and would therefore be susceptible to requests for a Social Security or credit card number. Luckily, I temporarily archive my deleted mail, so when I had second thoughts and decided to look at the message more closely, I found that it was a legitimate inquiry as to the status of an internal security application from one of my staff.

This morning I received a message, again from an unknown sender, with the subject header "bank change.doc." This one even had an attachment! Yikes! If I could have picked it up gingerly between latex-coated thumb and forefinger and dropped it in an incinerator, I would have. Instead I immediately zapped it to... wait a minute, I thought. Maybe I'd better open just the message itself and take a look. I did so, and lo and behold, it was a message from one of our subscription agents telling me that the company was changing banks and giving us the new address for our files.

In both of those cases, the sender might be forgiven for thinking I was being overcautious. After all, most spam is harmless, at least if you leave the attachments alone. Why couldn't I just open them and look before throwing them away?

The answer is twofold: for one thing, not all spam is harmless. Sometimes — and especially if your email system isn't sophisticated enough to block images — opening the message itself causes problems. For another thing, I'm sorry, but I'm too busy. I can't open and critically evaluate every one of the hundreds of email messages that slip past my automatic spam filter each day. (Even with the filter working, about 30-40% of the email I get is spam that has slipped past the defenses.) If you don't want me to treat your message like spam, then don't make it look like spam.

How can you avoid that? Here are a few tips:

1. Watch the typos. Spammers are notorious for using creative spelling to fool spam filters. That's why you get messages with subject headers like "Che.ep V1agra" and "H0t N.ked Serialists Want to Meet You." One reason the "bank change.doc" message tripped my mental alarm system was that the subject header was so strangely written.

2. Be specific, not generic. Any message with the subject header "Hi!" or "Thanks" or "It was nice to talk to you" or "Any progress yet?" will be quickly deleted by me unless I recognize the sender's name. Spammers use generic subject headers (often with a slightly flir-

tatious tone or veiled references to a previous meeting) to hook the lonely and unwary. Instead, say something like "Follow-up to our phone conversation re: approval plan" or "Here's the pricing proposal you requested."

3. Avoid vague financial references.

Every day I get spam messages with subject lines that say "Account update" or "You need to pay this." If I don't know the sender, they usually go straight to the trash. I don't always delete them without reading (since I am, after all, an acquisitions librarian and I expect to get messages that have to do with accounts and invoices), but why take the chance that I'll delete yours? Whenever possible, use your company name in the subject field. If I see a message that says "Account update," it's probably dead in the water. If it says "Wiley account update," I'm going to open it.

4. Send links, not attachments. If at all possible, put the document you want me to see on a server somewhere and include a link to it in your message. When I get a message with an attachment, and the message was sent by someone whose name I don't recognize, I am instantly very wary. Sometimes you have to use attachments, of course, and that's fine. Just follow the other rules above, and we'll probably have no problems.

So vendors and publishers, here's the rule of thumb: if you send a message to one of your customers and don't get a prompt reply, check your sent-mail archive and look at the subject header you used. It's possible that your message caused the recipient to bound into the thick underbrush, and he or she is hiding there, waiting for a sign that it's safe to come out. 🐿

Conquering Compliancy: The Society Perspective

by **Dean Smith** (Vice President, Sales & Marketing, ACS Publications, American Chemical Society, 1155 Sixteenth Street, NW, Washington, DC 20036; Phone: 202-872-8063; Fax: 202-776-8290) <d_smith@acs.org>

At a strategic planning session in August of 2003, I stated that the most important thing **ACS Publications** needed to do for the future was to become **COUNTER** compliant. I was concerned that we were missing an opportunity to join a growing list of publishers and agents who had already taken steps toward compliancy. Usage of **ACS Web Editions and Archives** had grown exponentially in the past few years and I wanted to make sure that li-

brarians could justify their expenditure on our products with usage reports that met an industry-wide standard. My **ACS** colleagues also had business concerns of their own. The technical infrastructure supporting our journal collection needed upgrades in several key areas and seventeen new editorial offices around the world were scheduled for 2004 (we have over 200). The effects of **Rowecom** coupled with a

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