

# ;login:

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MOTD

**USENIX**

The Advanced Computing Systems Association

# motd

by Rob Kolstad

Dr. Rob Kolstad has long served as editor of *login*. He is SAGE's Executive Editor, and also head coach of the USENIX-sponsored USA Computing Olympiad.

<kolstad@usenix.org>



## Why Can't They . . . ?

I really try to project a positive image and create positive slants on things. In fact, I usually hate sentences that begin with “Why can't they . . .” or “Why don't they . . .”, because these phrases seem to introduce rhetorical questions – people generally don't really want to know why they {can't|don't} do {stuff}. Usually, there's a good reason.

But I can hardly stand it any longer. Maybe if enough people point out the obvious, things can change.

Let's start with Microsoft's security push. *Network World* reports on page 6 of its February 2, 2004, issue that “Microsoft sought to advance its Trustworthy Computing Initiative last week” with a US\$6.8 billion budget and IE browser modifications.

That sounds pretty darn good to me. You'd think you could get a result with that much money (which comes to \$25 for almost every person over the age of two in the whole of the United States). I wonder, though.

How hard is it to disable execution of incoming email? Wouldn't you think they would have started on that project by now? And seen some results? I can't imagine that it could cost an entire billion dollars. The most recent worm demonstrated yet again that people lack the impulse-control to click “no” in attachment warnings. In fact, I'll argue that, in general, the informational value of “Click YES to accept this potentially harmful {widget}” has degenerated almost to nil, rendering such warnings useless for the general user. There are simply too many of them, and the general user has little understanding or concern.

Are customers really demanding the “infect my computer with a single keyclick” feature? I can't imagine that's true. Why can't Microsoft address this? Imagine the time and money it would save just on the most recent cleverly socially engineered malware.

On another topic, why can't spam be stopped? Or at least slowed down? What entity is running around trumpeting, “Spam is OK! It's a sign of a healthy industry! We should all embrace this vibrant new way of learning about new products!”? I honestly think that advertising industry members believe they have a right to figure out any way possible to annoy me with a commercial message, and that mitigating their efforts is somehow unpatriotic. Don't even start to talk to me about the benefit to me of popups and the even more insidious popunders.

Returning to spam, the old “it's not illegal even if you don't like it” argument is gone, to a great extent. A quick perusal of my 400/day spambox shows that the number of people who even begin to label their spam properly approaches 0.5% (it doesn't exceed 0.5%, it barely approaches 0.5% on some days). Yes, that's 99.5% noncompliance with our shiny new federal CAN-SPAM law. When will lawmakers judge the law a failure? Why in the world are we creating another multi-billion-dollar industry (spam elimination) so that email can be usable again as it was before we spent the money? Just keep saying: Each \$1B is more than \$3 for every living person in the USA. And don't kid yourself, you'll end up paying for it one way or another in higher prices or lower functionality in every single purchase you make.

Consider how many person-hours and money-units are consumed:

- removing spam
- fixing filters
- administrating anti-spam software

## EDITORIAL STAFF

### EDITOR

Rob Kolstad [kolstad@usenix.org](mailto:kolstad@usenix.org)

### CONTRIBUTING EDITOR

Tina Darmohray [tmd@usenix.org](mailto:tmd@usenix.org)

### MANAGING EDITOR

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### PROOFREADER

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### TYPESETTER

Festina Lente

## MEMBERSHIP, PUBLICATIONS, AND CONFERENCES

USENIX Association

2560 Ninth Street, Suite 215

Berkeley, CA 94710

Phone: 510 528 8649

FAX: 510 548 5738

Email: [office@usenix.org](mailto:office@usenix.org)

[login@usenix.org](mailto:login@usenix.org)

[conference@usenix.org](mailto:conference@usenix.org)

WWW: <http://www.usenix.org>

<http://www.sage.org>

- upgrading networks to handle the extra load
- “protecting” children from porn spam
- consoling users who are offended
- denying that it’s {x}’s fault
- learning that an important email was missed since it was buried in spam.

Why does anyone think this is OK? It’s not OK! It’s not even close! People should be screaming, yet there seems to be more of a collective sigh of inevitability, along with a promise of a solution from Microsoft (make mailing lists expensive). The costs are pervasive, yet we continue to tolerate it. Please, stop tolerating spam. How to solve the spam problem? Remove one of:

- easy access to the Internet (not possible)
- people clicking through to purchase spam products (not possible)
- anonymity (possible – make PKI or some other technology work so that you know who’s sending you email)
- ability to take money via credit cards

It’s a bit easier to see why computer service is so challenging and frustrating, given the way software can mess up a system’s installation and configuration. My laptop’s LCD display cable is apparently broken. Of course, the phone service force couldn’t even consider this as the problem until discussing new drivers, new window systems, etc. And, regrettably, they’re doing a good job.

Why can’t Microsoft make a desktop operating system that has at least a tiny bit of robustness? Why can random programs change my home page? Why can random programs write into the system startup so that my home page changes back to <http://sexygirls.ru> or whatever every time I reboot? Were customers really demanding this feature? I can well imagine it: “I’m too lazy to make Russ-

ian porn pages my home page, so please make sure any random Java program [or pick your favorite mechanism] can get so deep into my system that I have to reload Windows from scratch in order to get the system back to where it’s supposed to be.” Are we all really this stupid? I think not. By the way, I do my best never to click “Yes.” I have no idea how that damned registry entry got into my system.

Some problems really are hard to solve. But I think we didn’t scream loud enough when “executable email” came into being or Cantor and Siegel sent us down the road to spam. I distinctly remember screaming about executable email and being told “customers demand this.” Maybe, just maybe, we should try to counter stupid marketing decisions with a bit more objection than a collective sigh of resignation.

Any ideas on how to do this are solicited and will be warmly received.