



Combating

E-mail Clutter

By Sara Graves

Just as for many people, e-mail has become an integral part of my daily routine. Whether it is for work or for helping me keep in touch with friends and loved ones near or far, I rely on e-mail to get it done. But even though e-mail is my connection to the outside world, I have found it can become a burden if I don't periodically organize my inbox. Below are some of the ways I have found that help me to keep my inbox manageable.

There are several things you need to do to combat e-mail clutter. The first thing is to control the amount of incoming e-mail. To do so, you need to be selective in your e-mail subscriptions.

Unsolicited e-mail in your inbox is called spam. Spam is often associated with sexual-related material or products, mortgage companies, or drug therapies. You may receive spam if you create a new e-mail address, particularly if you are male; subscribe to a news group; if you sign up on a website which sells e-mail addresses, or if your e-mail address is posted online in association with a website.

The single most important thing an e-mail user can do to limit spam is to NEVER respond to any e-mail advertisement. If you respond to a spam advertisement, even if you click on "unsubscribe" at the bottom, you will receive more e-mail than before. Don't be fooled by those sites that say they are complying with the laws that limit spam. This is yet another ploy to get you to click on unsubscribe.

Or, if you visit a lot of websites, you can create another free e-mail account and use that when entering sites that require you to enter your personal information. Personally, I use a fake identity in addition to using a skeleton e-mail address so I am not exposing myself to websites that sell personal information. If you have a specific e-mail addresses for these types of sites, you don't need to worry about spam. Let the spam generators work. You don't have to read any of it. Set up automatic schedules in your e-mail program (if possible) to delete that spam from your inbox.

But when it comes to your main e-mail account, one of the easiest ways to control the clutter in your inbox is to set up e-mail filters in an e-mail program, such as Outlook Express, Eudora, Safari or Lotus Notes. To do so, set up rules in the program on what the program should do when it encounters e-mails with either specific addresses and/or content.

For instance, I use Outlook Express and

have designated that all e-mails that contain profanity, or spam-specific wording, such as Viagra or mortgage, be placed in my deleted folder. This is in addition to setting up the program's built-in filters to filter out spam automatically. I have also set up rules to move certain e-mails with specific e-mail addresses into specified folders so that I can read those e-mails later, without having to move them myself on a daily basis. So each time I click on Send and Receive, my incoming e-mails are automatically redirected into the inbox, specific folders or the deleted folder. This alone saves me a tremendous amount of time since I receive hundreds of e-mails each week.

Another way to limit your inflow of e-mails is to avoid having your e-mail all go into the same inbox. To do so, create free e-mail accounts for specific, but separate interests. For instance, if you are involved in cooking, you might create a free Yahoo account, such as mycooking@Yahoo.com that your Yahoo cooking e-mails would go into. This

Avoid Being “Phished”

Many e-mail users have been warned against being “phished.” Unfortunately, most e-mail users don’t know what phishing is and still fall prey to it.

Phishing is when crooks illegally con people out of their personal information by sending e-mails that appear to come from legitimate sources, such as eBay. The e-mails frequently ask for the individual to enter their password, credit/debit card number or account number. But instead of this going to the source that the e-mail user thinks it’s going to, it is redirected to another account. Then the cons take that information and clear out banking accounts, make fraudulent charges on credit cards, and/or sell the information to other crooks.

One of the ways you can detect phishing is to look closely at what the return address is when you click on it. The address is frequently one letter or digit away from the legitimate web address. For instance, the phishers may redirect the information to www2.bankofamerica.com or www.wells-fargo.com. Notice the “2” in the first address or the dash in the second? However, some phishers have taken their tactics to an even higher level by redirecting your e-mail address to legitimate Web addresses, such as www.wellsfargo.com. This is indeed a valid e-mail address for Wells Fargo, but this is not their real site. Instead, it is a skeleton website being hosted by a Web server in another country.

To avoid becoming a victim of these types of scams, make it a hard-and-fast rule to NEVER send your personal identification/account numbers or passwords over e-mail. If you receive what appears to be a legitimate solicitation for such information, call the company in question and ask them about the e-mail. I can tell you that you will be hard pressed to find any of these e-mails legitimate. Legitimate companies typically have privacy policies that prevent them from asking for personal information over e-mail.

eliminates how many e-mails you must encounter each time you open your inbox, especially if you read your e-mail from one computer. You can instead choose to set aside time during the week when it is most convenient to check that cooking Yahoo account.

So once you have your e-mail intake down to a controlled science, how do you keep track of the e-mails you do want to read?

The key is organizing your inbox. To simplify what you do with your e-mail once you receive it, it is best to create folders in your e-mail program. Most e-mail programs will enable you to do so.

One way is to create a Pending file and an Action file in addition to your inbox. Therefore, when e-mails come in, you either answer them in one minute or less, or move the e-mails into an Action folder (the folder in which the e-mails you must answer that day, but take longer than a minute to respond, a Pending file (for those e-mails that you need additional information on to take action on) or into a To Read folder (for e-mails that have untimely reading or weblinks associated with them).

Also, if possible, set up your preferences in your e-mail program to set unread e-mails as a bolded color separate from the color of those that have been read. This way you can quickly see if you’ve opened an e-mail yet. This helps you keep track of unanswered e-mails in a busy Action folder.

You will most likely need to create other folders in your e-mail program to save e-mails you’ve read and responded to, but would like to keep. I don’t suggest printing your e-mails unless the information is critical because the pages of printed e-mails only clutter up your office filing system and cost you money in ink and paper.

And if you are afraid you’ll forget important e-mail information if you don’t print them out, consider using a program like Outlook to create reminder messages. These programs usually have a place

where you can type in notes. Simply type in the part of an e-mail you need to remember (or copy and paste it into the program) and attach it to a reminder. Type in your notes any information you want to add to help you remember what needs to be done in connection with that e-mail and where the original e-mail can be found in case you need to look over it again. Also make sure the reminder will appear in your inbox or on your computer early enough for you to take action.

Yahoo also offers a calendar/reminder option with its free email service—to remind you to pay a bill, attend a meeting or return a call.

Many experts agree that it is best not to constantly check your e-mail. This can sometimes overwhelm your already busy day.

Instead, designate two to three times a day in which you can normally check your e-mail, such as the first thing in the morning and late afternoon. Set aside a decent amount of time to respond to the e-mails in your Action folder.

You should check your Pending file at least once a day and take some action on those items if no action has been taken in a day or so, unless you aren’t expecting an immediate response. A reminder message may be all that is necessary to keep others working on that e-mail.

If someone needs to reach you urgently during those times, they can call you or instant message you. Most e-mails aren’t so urgent that the sender can’t wait until the afternoon when you predictably will answer your e-mails.

Although checking your e-mail at specific times during the day doesn’t work in all workflow situations, it does in most. Surprisingly, many people say that if they stop checking their e-mails so frequently, they get more work done.

And getting work done is exactly what you want e-mail to help you do.