Hotmail, Yahoo email, Gmail, AIM mail - these are all free email services, but are they worth the price you pay? Sure, free email services such as Hotmail, being web-based, allow you to access your email from virtually anywhere in the world, but other web-based email services do that as well.

The downsides to free email services are legion, and many well-documented. Hotmail is known as both a spam magnet and originator. Meaning not only will you get tons of spam, but email you send may be blocked due to its free email service of origin. Of course, this problem is not unique to Hotmail - all of the better known free email services are targets for spam, precisely because everyone knows that millions of people use them because they are, well, free. And Hotmail and Yahoo are some of the most spoofed email domains around by spammers.

But aside from those known issues, which I won't cover here, few people actually stop to think about this: if this email service is free, how is it being subsidized? In some cases it's obvious, such as Gmail's context-relevant ads. More than a few people have commented on how unnerving it can be to be reading a particularly private email, and to see ads for adult toys and other intimate services right next to their email.

But what about the not so obvious cost to subsidize? Earlier this year I wrote about "domain shame", which is the issue of how the email domain you use reflects on you professionally and even personally. Most (although not all) would not use a Hotmail or Yahoo account for their business correspondence, but many obviously do for personal communications without giving it a second thought, even though many email recipients echo the feelings of the person who observed "When I see a Yahoo or Hotmail domain I think not only cheap, but also disposable and possibly porno, because of the anonymity of those domains."

But beyond that, how about the advertisements carried in your email, delivered to your family, friends and (oh dear) colleagues every time you send them an email from one of those free email services? There's nothing I love more than getting a footer full of ads every time I open up a friend's email.

I'm not saying that you shouldn't use these free email services, mind you. I'm just saying that you should be aware of their actual cost.

Ever signed up for something and ended up with an inbox full of spam? No matter how honest we are, people are naturally suspicious and would rather risk a disposable account to the spammers than their home email address.

I can't blame them for being cautious and I wouldn't ban free accounts from my board. I always sign up with a free account when joining forums myself -- and if the board doesn't accept free accounts, I don't join.
How did you do your sig, I like it!

Who Blocks the Most E-Mail?

Deliverability varies wildly among ISPs, according to studies by Lyris, Pivotal Veracity, and Return Path:

* 91.5 percent was delivered in Q4 2005, Lyris reported in its analysis of gross e-mail deliverability, up from 90.75 percent in Q3.
* 97.5 percent of e-mail (inbox plus bulk folder) was delivered to users of the top 10 ISPs, while 76.4 percent of e-mail was delivered to the bottom 10's users.
* Top 10 ISPs for both gross and inbox delivery in Lyris' analysis were, in order: PeoplePC, EarthLink, Yahoo!, Gmail, USA.NET, Knology, Juno, Road Runner (SoCal), CompuServer, and .Mac.
* 91.7 percent of AOL-bound e-mail tracked by Pivotal Veracity clients went to the inbox, the highest of six ISPs studied. The others were Yahoo! (86.5%), MSN (81%), Hotmail (80.95), and NetZero/Juno (74%). Gmail filtered the most: 18.9%, compared to 0.1% for AOL.
* Return Path's top blockers were Excite (42.9%), Gmail (40.4%), Lycos (33.8%), and Adelphia (31%).
* The most lenient were USA.NET (9.9%), CompuServer (9.4%), .Mac (8.1%), and EarthLink (7.8%).

And for an excellent discussion on the more technical and procedural downsides (rather than just the social downsides) of free email services, see here.

Some ISPs are resorting to a new tactic to increase revenue: inserting advertisements into web pages requested by their end users. They use a transparent web proxy (such as this one) to insert javascript and/or HTML with the ads into pages returned to users."

renthacker.net — Email Password Recovery Services www.renthacker.net We are a team of experienced computer professionals from US, France, Italy, Germany and with the most advanced technology! We are specialized in hacking/cracking/recovering web email passwords of world famous email services Yahoo!, Hotmail, Lycos, Gmail , AOL

Recently I started getting invitations to join Flixster from both friends and complete strangers. Obviously, this was spam, but why were these complete strangers sending it to me? (For that matter, why were these friends inviting me to join Flixstr, which is a social networking site geared towars movie reviews?)
Here's what the typical spam invitation for Flixster looked like:

To: me@example.com
Subject: John D has sent you a private message
http://www.flixster.com/servlet/invite/619917699cmcA619918163Btlkhlp3Cm
John D
This note was sent via Flixster by John D (johndoe@hotmail.com) to me@example.com. If you prefer not to receive emails like this, tell us here: http://www.flixster.com/DoNotSend.jsp?e=me@example.com.

Then I noticed two curious things: 1. All the spam was coming from AOL and Hotmail accounts - real AOL and Hotmail accounts of real people, and 2. It was coming not just to me, but to role accounts at our organization - for example support@example.com. These people had really contacted us for support at one time or another, but a generic role account would hardly be a friend to whom you would send an invitation.

Then I got email from someone, a professional contact with an address at AOL, asking me (and everyone else in his address book) to please ignore the invitation to join Flixster which appeared to come from him but which, he said, had actually been sent by Flixster.

So, what is actually going on?

We decided to investigate, and here is what we found:

Once you join Flixster, Flixster commandeers your address book - your list of all of your personal contacts in your AOL (or Hotmail, Yahoo or Gmail) address book - and sends out an invitation to join Flixster "from" you. Oh sure, you enable them to do it - but clearly enough people are unaware of what they are doing that it's causing a problem.
How?
Flixster is getting their AOL (and Hotmail, and Yahoo, and Gmail) passwords!
Read on.
Using AOL as an example, when you first sign up for Flixster using an AOL email address, after you select a username and password, the very next screen prompts you for your AOL password!

Here's that screen - look how compelling it looks that you should give them your AOL password!:

If you use a Gmail address, you can get the same screen, only with the Gmail logo. Same for Hotmail and Yahoo.

Once you give them your password, they grab everyone's email addresses from your AOL, Hotmail, Yahoo or Gmail address book, and spam them with the invitation. In your name using your email address.

And they access your AOL account before you ever get to the next step. Even though they make you feel as if you have complete control over the process by telling you "On the next page you will be able to select whom to invite",

they already have your contacts by that point. How do we know they access your account first? Watch what happens if you give them the wrong password:

How compelling does that look?

Now, who do we blame for all this? Flixster for asking for the password? The user for giving it to them? After all, the user had to take an affirmative action to send you the invitation spam. But, do they feel compelled to send it? Do they even understand what they are doing?

Do they feel that their ISP has approved this or even partnered with Flixster because Flixster has placed their ISP's logo right next to the password prompt?

Is this phishing in plain sight?

For their part, Flixster is not only unrepentant about their tactics, but brag about them. An article in American Venture Magazine following Flixster's getting $2million in VC funding last month, included the following:

"But the site has also grown due to its aggressive viral marketing practices that have raised the hackles of some potential users. Such practices might include the automated selection of your email account's entire address book in order to send a Flixster invitation to all of your contacts. (Emphasis ours.)

But such practices are becoming increasingly more common as new and even established web sites look to attract visitors without expensive marketing campaigns and a hefty advertising budget.

"I attribute our success to a combination of both of those," Greenstein said. "We make it easy to invite your friends. Other sites don't provide good ways for people to spread the word. And, we tried to build a really compelling site."

Flixster's Terms of Service start out by saying: "I can't believe you really clicked on this. What are you trying to find out? Here is our privacy policy (link to privacy policy)."

I have been alerted that some people have had error messages when they have emailed me.
I have a perfectly valid email address, and the problem applies to all the email accounts in my small company.
But - we ARE receiving emails from some people...if there is a pattern, it seems to be that we are not receiving emails from gmail and hotmail and aol, but 'professional' (e.g. emails sent from a company account) email accounts seem to get through (we are certainly receiving some emails, but clearly we do not know if all are getting through)
I have tried emailing from a gmail account and get the following error message:
This is an automatically generated Delivery Status Notification

Delivery to the following recipient failed permanently:
audrey@handsupholidays.com

Technical details of permanent failure:
PERM_FAILURE: SMTP Error (state 13): 554 5.7.1 <audrey@handsupholidays.com>: Relay access denied

If you actually go on to read their Terms of Service, however, you'll find that they mention nothing at all about this. Nothing. One way or the other. But they do, ironically, state that it is a violation of their Terms of Service to "Create a false or misleading identity of, including, but not limited to, a Flixster employee, or falsely state or otherwise misrepresent your affiliation with a person or entity, for the purpose of misleading others as to the identity of the sender or the origin of a message or to harvest or otherwise collect information about others."

Oh, and it's also a violation to "Disseminate any unsolicited or unauthorized advertising, promotional materials, 'junk mail', 'spam', 'chain letters', 'pyramid schemes', or any other form of such solicitation, or to "Harvest or collect email addresses or other contact information of Members, including usernames, from the Flixster.com website by electronic or other means."

But, it's ok, because their entire TOS is governed by their privacy policy, which states very clearly:

"Our Just-Say-No-to-SPAM Policy

We do not send SPAM of any kind. The only email you will get from us is a weekly update of the latest movies and quiz questions and, of course, any personal messages sent directly to you by your friends."

Me? I've now got a Just-Say-No-to-Flixster Policy.

Read more:
» Is Quechup a Big Fat Spammer? Are They Accessing Your Hotmail, AOL, Gmail or Yahoo Address Book? The Answer to at Least One of These is Yes!
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» Facebook Joins Ranks of Sites Scraping Your Address Book and Spamming Your Contacts - This Time It's AIM
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57 Comments »

1.

I am having EXACTLY this problem. It has been a total nightmare. Yes, I gave the password, but I've done that before, just so I could have easy access ONCE, then select those in my address book I wanted to invite. I clicked "unselect all" and carefully went through and selected only those I wanted to invite (about 5 people). I noticed that although I'd clicked "unselect all", there were about 40 addresses at the end of the list still checked. I manually unchecked all of those then hit send. Well, I'm guessing that that was about page 1 of 3, because EVERY other name in my address book was invited: professional contacts, old boyfriends, etc. It even sent mail to my "post to blog" address so that my first and last name were posted on my blog (something I never do). I think that so many people got those emails from me that a few clicked Spam on me. Since then, I've had people at places I'm interviewing report that they were unable to receive emails from me. My best friend can't receive emails from me either. Flixter is purely evil. I will never EVER use a password to gain access to my email address book again. This is a total violation of privacy, and I am not happy about it.
Out of the last 100 users 37 are unconfirmed:
12 hotmail/msn
5 aol
3 gmail
3 yahoo
1 btinternet
1 lineone
1 tiscali
and
11 non-webmail domains