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Say it, don't spray it: Dealing with jokes, rumors, and spam

Crabby Office Lady

This week's column is a bit of a lecture. I'm trying, once again, to beg you to refrain from sending rumors, hoaxes, and jokes, either to or from your workplace. Of course, what you do in your personal time is your business, but please remember the Bcc box.

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"Say it, don't spray it." I've used this little saying before, and it apparently made an impression on some of my readers (who, of course, wrote to tell me about it). But some of you are still not getting the message. When I wrote that line, I was talking about using the **Bcc** box to prevent all your e-mail recipients from seeing each others' e-mail addresses. It's the courteous thing to do (and I'm nothing if not an e-mail etiquette advocate, even though not the perfect practitioner).

So, why an entire column about it? Well, this column is not just about the **Bcc** box, per se. It's more about how to deal with keeping all those jokes (rarely funny), rumors (rarely true), and spam e-mail (rarely funny or true) from soiling your pristine Inbox when your senders are clueless about the Bcc box.

The good guys: Those who use the Bcc box

Using the **Bcc** box to prevent e-mail addresses from being spread all over digital kingdom come is all well and good, but it's up to the sender to instigate that. And you, as the sender, are well and good, and I love you for that.

Of course, if I start assuming that you do use the **Bcc** box when appropriate, well, that just makes a you-know-what out of you and me. So let's review:

- To display the **Bcc** box (if it isn't already showing): In an e-mail message, click the little arrow next to the **Options** box , and then click **Bcc**.

- When you add someone's e-mail address to the **Bcc** box, a copy of your message will be sent to him, but his address will not be visible to anyone else (including himself) receiving the message.

- And when should you use the **Bcc** box?

  - When you're sending out a mass mailing and you want to protect the e-mail addresses and identities of everyone on that mailing.

  - Or, when you don't want someone in the **To** or **Cc** box to know that you are including another person in that message (sneaky, but useful in certain circumstances).

A Bcc caveat

Before you use **Bcc** box, make sure your intended recipient is expecting it. That person may need to take steps to establish you as a safe sender (or a safe recipient, if your name will be in the **To** box of the **Bcc** message). See, lots of spammers use the **Bcc** box to try to wriggle their way out of the junk mail filter (I hear their screams and it fills me with glee), so many junk mail filters automatically flag messages using the **Bcc** box as junk.

So how can you, as the receiver, prevent — or at least diminish — the amount of junk you get (and still manage to save the friendship of the senders)? Let's dig a little deeper (meaning let's go beyond praying that your senders are using the **Bcc** box) and find out.

Taking matters into your own hands

So you say that your senders do not know what the **Bcc** box is and have no plans on learning how to use it? I know; there's only so much we can do for our loved ones (besides full-blown interventions). I used to take the tack of telling my friends to stop sending me these awful jokes and rumors, but I have lost more than a few friends doing that. And so I shall not advise you to do as I did.

Instead, there are steps you can take to diminish the impact these types of messages have on your Inbox. And by "these messages" I mean rumors, hoaxes, jokes, and plain old junk mail. Let's review:

Rumors, hoaxes, and phishing

When I was younger and had no more sense than your average garden gnome, I believed. I believed that my tiny, sugar-encrusted baby teeth were worth money to an apparently cash-strapped fairy. I believed that a certain 5-year-old cereal commercial star died from eating a certain type of exploding candy mixed with a certain soft drink. And I believed that if I forwarded a message promising free champagne to 10 (now former) friends, in six days I, too, would receive a case of the bubbly stuff myself.

As you know (or should now, frankly), none of these are true. And frankly, the majority — if not all — the rumors you receive from well-meaning e-mail senders are not true either. Here are some general guidelines:

- If the message has something in the subject or body to the effect of "Forward this message to get a free...", it's a hoax. (Bye-bye free bubbly. Bye-bye free Gap clothes.)

- Microsoft and AOL are not merging (as far as I know, anyway). As well, Mr. Gates himself has no interest in giving away vast sums of his hard-earned money to people who forward the most chain letters. (While yes, I do work for Bill, no, I did not get this denial from him directly. However, I'm fairly certain that this hoax is just that: a hoax.)

- "Phishing" scams try to get personal information from you for identity theft. Any e-mail you get about foreign lotteries, about PayPal trying to get you to update your personal information, or about money in Nigeria that someone needs help getting out of the country is a phishing scam. Don't bite the phishing line; you may end up with a painful hook in your mouth that may take years to heal.

Jokes

On to the jokes. If you're like me (and if you are, you know who you are), you have family members, friends, and even coworkers who have nothing better with their time than to pass on jokes to you via e-mail. And, if you are even more like me, you already have an overflowing Inbox that is threatening to burst. Although this may not make headline news (nor should it), it is an irritation, and if it gets to be too overwhelming, it becomes a threat to your digital security. And why is this? Because the more jokey e-mails passed on from one person to the next, the more likely your address is going to find its way into the filthy typing fingers of a spammer.

Don't get me wrong; I like a good joke as much as the next office lady, but I personally feel that the best part of a joke is in the telling of it. However, I do understand that sometimes a joke is just too good to keep to one's self, and perhaps the person you want to tell it to isn't nearby or perhaps is, I don't know, doing iceberg research in Antarctica and not reachable by phone (but, of course, has e-mail availability). And so ... the digital joke is the only way to go for some people who just cannot wait to tell it.

But folks, please listen to me: When you forward one of those Internet rumors or jokes to someone, particularly if you pass it on to many someones whose e-mail addresses you put plainly in the **To** box, you're exposing all of them to the scary digital world of scammers and their ilk.

Think of it this way (and I'll try and keep this is as G-rated as I can): When A kisses B and then B kisses C, it's just as if C kissed A (creating a real rift between B and C, but that's a different sort of column for a different type of Web site. Paging Dr. Phil! Paging Dr. Phil!).

What I'm saying is this: You're putting your privacy and everyone else's into serious jeopardy when you pass on these types of "messages." And all those kisses could be coming from people with serious halitosis.

And so, how can you protect yourself from these, um, funny mails and scintillating rumors without actually telling your senders to cease and desist? To me, it's obvious. Luckily, Outlook has some solutions.

You make the rules

I use rules in Outlook a lot. I use them to move messages as they arrive, when I send them, and to deal with the issues this column covers. You can create just about any sort of rule. Examples:

- Create a rule that will move arriving messages with words such as "Fwd," "Viagra," or "joke" in the subject line or body of the message to a specific folder. Then you can choose to either read them later or just dump them permanently.

- If you know that certain people in your life only send junk, create a rule that sends messages from these people to a specific folder so, again, you can choose to read them later or dispose of them.

More information about setting up and using rules

- **Outlook 2003:**
  About managing messages with rules
  Create a rule
- **Outlook 2007:**
  Manage messages by using rules
  Create custom actions rules

Use the Junk E-Mail filter

The Junk E-Mail filter in Outlook is your best friend, and really, your best tool for controlling the flow of whatever you deem "junk" to your Inbox. But first, let me give you some examples of some of the ways in which you can make the Junk E-Mail filter your personal security officer — and this is something that you can continue to update, refresh, and hone as often as you want.

- If you just don't want e-mail from anyone writing from a specific domain, you can block messages coming in from the entire domain. You can do this with international domains as well. If, down the road, you strike up an ongoing correspondence with someone from that domain you blocked previously, you can unblock that specific e-mail address.
- You can quickly add a sender to your blocked senders list, right after the message comes in — a few clicks just one time is all it takes.

Information about setting up and using the junk mail filter

- Audio course: Slice the spam! How Outlook helps protect you from junk e-mail
- Demo: Junk mail and spammers meet their match in Outlook
- About the Junk E-mail Filter (Outlook 2007)
- About the Junk E-mail Filter (Outlook 2003)

You may have noticed, just from quickly scanning this column, that Outlook rules and the junk e-mail filter overlap: When you're dealing with how to manage unwanted e-mail messages or perhaps messages that you want to deal with at a later time, sometimes a rule will work better for you and sometimes using the Outlook junk e-mail filter options will work best. Play around a bit and see what works best for you.

"To invent, you need a good imagination and a pile of junk." — Thomas A. Edison

About the author

Annik Stahl, the Crabby Office Lady columnist, takes all of your complaints, compliments, and knee-jerk reactions to heart. Therefore, she graciously asks that you let her know whether this column was useful to you — or not — by entering your feedback using the **Was this information helpful?** tool below. And remember: If you don't vote, you can't complain.

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