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Spam and Marketing Communications

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Abstract

The purpose of this research is to describe how spam has become an issue in marketing communications, considering opinions of the digital marketing sector and Internet users. In-depth interviews were organized with digital marketing experts in order to gain a profounder understanding in the complex construct of spam. Additionally, a web-based survey explored whether and how Internet users handle spam and privacy online. Survey results unveiled three users segments, each holding specific profiles on concern for personal information exposed online, sharing information online, and particular coping actions against spamming (Buchanan, Paine, Joinson, & Reips, 2006; Smith, Milberg, & Burke, 1996).

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1. Introduction

The explosive growth and evolution of the Internet have created a borderless digital environment that has brought forth new and creative ways of advertising. Whereas a decade ago marketers focused on reaching the consumer via more traditional media channels (i.e. print media, TV), now more than half of the advertising efforts are aimed at consumers via websites and social media (Fauconnier, 2012). This trend has brought forth a proliferation of advertising messages spread online (De Bruyn & Lilien, 2008). Moreover, these online messages often are perceived as unsolicited and/or unwanted messages, which is generally denoted as spam. Although the number of spam

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messages reaching Internet users' mailbox has decreased substantially over the past years because of increasingly performant mail filters and actions undertaken by Internet providers, still 70 % of all email traffic comprises spam (Securelist, 2013).

Defining spam is not that straightforward. The concept can be interpreted in a myriad of perspectives. In accordance with European legislation (2002/58/EC) regarding the protection of electronic communication, spam is defined as 'unsolicited commercial email messages' in the current research. Although spam can be dispersed through different communication channels, the current study confines spam to all commercial messages derived from email traffic.

Despite substantial EU legislation trying to ban spam in Europe (Directive 2002/21/EC of 7 March 2002 "Framework Directive", amongst others), illegal online activities still have a negative effect on the use of Internet services. Hence, the European Commission has been sensitizing regulatory authorities and stakeholders on fighting spam, spyware and malicious software. (COM (2006) 688 final).

According to Spamlaws (2012) spam messages emitted through email still are the most used type of spam. These unwanted emails do not only cause irritation with the receivers (e.g. due to the dispersion of viruses and the overload of their mailbox) but, moreover, an increase in online privacy concern is ascertained. While some Internet users carefully monitor the personal information they reveal online, others take more risks regarding their privacy and online security (Milne, Labrecque, & Cromer, 2009).

To gain a profounder understanding in the topic, in-depth interviews on spam and online privacy matters were organized with experts in the direct marketing sector and with Internet service providers. In addition, via a web-based survey, this study explored how Internet users manage online privacy and whether they take measures to protect themselves against spamming on the Internet. The results of this survey showed three users segments, each holding specific profiles on concern for personal information exposed online and on sharing information online, on socio-demographics and on particular coping actions (Buchanan, Paine, Joinson, & Reips, 2006; Smith, Milberg, & Burke, 1996).

2. Research methods

In this research both quantitative as qualitative techniques were used. For insights on thoughts from experts in the digital marketing sector, in-depth interviews were organized. These insights were used to set up a web-based consumer survey in which consumers were questioned on their attitudes towards spam and the protection of personal information online.

2.1 In-depth interviews

In order to gain a better understanding in how the digital media sector reflects on spam, in-depth interviews were organized. Open-ended questions were posed to allow respondents to elaborate and expound on feelings and concerns regarding spam, giving respondents the freedom to answer the questions in their own words. The key questions of the interviews were preplanned (and later used for the consumer's questionnaire) but the interview was conversational enough to enable questions flowing from previous questions.

Three intensive individual interviews were conducted to explore experts' perspectives on spam. The purpose of the in-depth interviews was to gauge the insights of experts on spam, discussing the current issues on spam and the evolution of spam since the introduction of the legislation concerning certain legal aspects on services of the information society and sending of electronic mail. The three experts that were interviewed are Joris Buys of EDPnet (Internet service provider) and member of ISPA (Internet service provider association), Patrick Marck, general manager of Interactive Advertising Bureau Belgium (IAB) and Nicolas Cobbaert, inspector at FPS (Federal Public Service) Economy.

The answers that surfaced were used to set up a survey aimed at consumers, asking about their attitudes towards spam and online privacy and whether and how they cope with spam.

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