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THE KING OF SPAM



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Meet Jeff Slaton, better known to millions throughout cyberspace as "THE SPAM KING."

Slaton has taken a practice that many regard as a reprehensible use of the network of computer networks known as the Internet, raised it to an art form, and turned it into a lucrative business.

For \$425, Slaton will send thousands — or millions — of the same message to Internet users either through "Usenet" groups or electronic mail, typical-

Jeff Slaton says he provides a cheap service for 'under-capitalized' entrepreneurs

Scattershot on the Internet lambasted as cyber junk mail

ly hawking a client's product or agenda. The practice is known as "spamming," taken from a famous Monty Python Flying Circus skit.

The practice is reviled by most Internet users, who say it clutters up the system with unwanted solicitations. Yet among his clients, he is revered because he gets the word out for only a token amount of cash.

"He is the Spam King, no doubt,"

See SPAM, Back Page

Push enter: See your message everywhere

■ SPAM

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says Mike Dudley, who has used Slaton's tactics to promote his international "call-back" service, Compass International Telecom of Boston. "There is him and there is nobody else . . . Nobody does it with the cunning and the joy that he does."

Slaton's spamming is like a direct marketing operation run amok. He doesn't "target" likely buyers, like most mass mailers. Instead, he charges clients a flat \$425 fee. He says he now averages about 15 spams a week, which if his claims are true, works out to more than \$330,000 in a year.

"It's just as cost-effective for me to send to 6 million e-mail addresses as 1 million, so why bother?" Slaton says. "In fact, prequalifying a prospect is a dangerous thing, simply because you might just very well miss a whole group of people who are out on the fringe."

Slaton's style reflects a growing issue on the largely unregulated Internet, which is increasingly being used as an advertising vehicle.

Unregulated realm

Federal law prohibits sending unsolicited faxes, but there are currently no such regulations against sending e-mail, says Robert E. Smith, editor of *The Privacy Journal*, a newsletter that focuses on electronic privacy issues. Smith thinks it would be premature for such laws to be passed involving the Internet.

"One of the good things about the Net is that it is free of bureaucracy and regu-

lation," he says. "I think that it is self-governing unlike any other institution that I know of, and I think that will happen here. Users of the Net will figure out a methodology" to deal with the spamming.

Recently, for example, Slaton posted advertisements throughout the Internet for Scott Glasrud, who is running for political office in New Mexico. Advertisements for Glasrud's campaign appeared in news groups such as electro-chemical reactions, fine arts, and even "rec.pyrotechnics" — a special interest group devoted to fireworks. The advertisements asked readers to send \$5 to Glasrud's office in Albuquerque, to help get him elected in order to fight "proposed state and federal regulations for the Internet."

The spams for Glasrud were not well received by Internet readers. "Many of us were born at night, but not last night! Sorry, no \$5 to you," wrote one America Online user, who saw the spam in an Internet group reserved for the discussion of human factor issues.

Slaton recently took a leave of absence from his day job at U.S. West Direct, where he was involved in selling advertisements in the Yellow Pages, says Gail Harrington, a manager in his former office. Slaton says that he has a background in advertising, marketing, and telecommunications.

Why spam? To help "the under-capitalized entrepreneur," says Slaton from his home in Albuquerque.

Some of the messages are clearly identified as coming from the "SPAM KING," but most only bear the name of Slaton's

client. The spams are, for the most part, untraceable.

"I like to sign [the messages] because I like to stir the controversy, and keep my label, The Spam King, on people's mind," says Slaton. Sometimes, he says, he even includes his phone number.

Slaton is certainly on people's minds. Since early August, Slaton's moniker has appeared in more than 159,000 messages posted on the Usenet, according to Deja-News, a Usenet indexing service.

Demise is exaggerated

People have claimed that the "Spam King Is Dead" — meaning that his account has been shut down — only to have him reappear under another name with another Internet provider. Many times, in fact, Slaton doesn't even spam from his own account.

"I have people set up their own Internet service accounts," says Slaton. "They give me their login and password, and then I launch my program."

The "program" is actually a collection of tools and a database that he says can put an electronic message before "6 to 8 million people. . . . I have the technology and the capability, and I try to keep it under wraps."

Professional direct marketers are not impressed with Slaton's approach.

"I don't think it is intelligent, no more than I would think that it is intelligent to mail direct mail to every business for a high-tech product when they aren't prospects for it," says Norm Swent, president of Marketry, a Seattle-based direct mail firm. "A method of target marketing

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— Jeff Slaton, *The Spam King*

makes sense for any media."

Slaton says target marketing has little use from his viewpoint and the costs are only slightly more, regardless of how many missives he sends. Of course, somebody does pay for the spamming: the companies over whose networks the messages travel and the people who receive them.

Companies and individuals have tried to combat Slaton's tactics, using such methods as mail filtering. Walter Bays, a senior staff engineer with Sun Microsystems Inc., who has been tracking Slaton for several weeks, says the New Mexico attorney general has been alerted because some of Slaton's spams have been for pyramid schemes.

"The Net citizens seem very mad, as though he is a test case: If he succeeds then the Net will collapse under an avalanche of junk mail from thousands of imitators, but if he gives up then the Net will live free and prosper," Bays says. "Both hopes and fears are probably exaggerated."

Yet Slaton remains popular with companies trying to use the newest medium for getting their message out to potential buyers.

"There is a market out there on the Internet to be exploited — positively so," says Slaton. "You know, exploitation isn't a negative word."