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Corporations Have an Unsubscribe Problem

By [Brian Livingston](#)

February 10, 2006

Can you trust a major corporation to keep your e-mail address out of spammers' hands after you fill out the company's unsubscribe form?

Not always, according to a service that tracks what happens when addresses are submitted to unsubscribe mechanisms on the Web.

I wrote [column](#) last week that a service called [Lashback LLC](#) has tested some 170,000 different "remove" procedures that it's found on the Internet. This small antispam firm says it already caught some big fish in its net.

Riches from Nigeria

Brandon Phillips, the president and CEO of Lashback, says one of the worst unsubscribe problems he's seen relates to the site of Gevalia Kaffe, a subsidiary of Kraft Foods.

According to an "[unsubscribe abuse report](#)" posted at the Lashback site



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service unsubscribed from Gevalia's gourmet-coffee promotions using never-before-seen e-mail address on Oct. 25, 2005. In the overwhelm of the thousands of unsub forms Lashback has tested, the request for more e-mail is received.

On Jan. 20, 2006, however, Lashback began receiving spam messages at the address. The first one came from "Barrister Mark":

"I am MARK EDMUND (Esq.) a Solicitor. I am the Personal Attorney to a national of your country, who is an oil merchant in Niger. On 21st of April 2001, my client, his wife and their two children were involved in an accident along Sagbama Express Road Balyasa State, here in Nigeria. The occupants of the vehicle unfortunately lost their lives. Since then I have made several inquiries to locate any of my clients extended relatives, this has been unsuccessful."

The message went on to offer the recipient -- which was just a made-up e-mail address, as you recall -- a share of the estate, worth "USD\$12 MILLION". For this reason, the attorney proposed to keep 60 percent for himself, assigning 40 percent for the next of kin and the payment of taxes. Some steep attorney fees they have in Nigeria.

This message is obviously fraudulent, and the other messages that arrive at my address are much better. Lashback's test e-mail address has received more than 100 spam messages since the problem began, according to documentation I have.

A spokesman for Kraft Foods, Larry Baumann, told me in a telephone interview that "Gevalia and Kraft have a zero-tolerance policy for spam. We have very strict policies in place, both internally and with our vendors, that govern our communications with consumers."

"We have a password-protected, secure site where we post our suppression list," Baumann continued. "That list is updated daily, and our affiliates are notified to upload the file."

How Unsub Addresses Get to Spammers

When Lashback finds an unsubscribe mechanism that results in the sale of e-mail addresses receiving spam, is it because the operators of the unsubscribed addresses sold the addresses to spammers? Not necessarily.

There's no way to say for sure what happened in Gevalia's case. But one clue can be found at the bottom of one promotional message for the company's "This message was sent to you by a trusted affiliate."

Many companies pay commissions on sales made by affiliates who send promotional messages to their various e-mail lists. Under the CAN-SPAM Act, which took effect in the U.S. in January 2004, companies that promote their products via e-mail must honor unsubscribe requests. These companies are also required to make every subsidiary or agent stop sending e-mail to the people who request to "Remove me."

Many corporations, therefore, maintain lists of e-mail addresses that have requested cancellation. If these lists are provided to affiliates so they can harvest the names from their e-mailings, it takes only one dishonest affiliate to turn an entire list over to spammers.

E-mail addresses of these so-called suppression lists could be very attractive to spam marketers. When an address is submitted to an untrustworthy web form, it proves that:

- **1.** The e-mail address is valid;
- **2.** Someone reads e-mails sent to that address; and
- **3.** The recipient is comfortable enough with the Internet to correctly enter an address into a Web form.

These are the minimum qualifications needed to place an order for something that spammers might want to advertise.

Keeping Suppression Lists Private

This kind of problem with unsubscribe lists is exactly why the U.S. Federal Trade Commission [recommended](#) in 2004 that Congress **not** create a "do-not-solicit" registry. Unfortunately, the fact that the suppression lists required by the CAN-SPAM Act get into the hands of spammers is just one of the negative side-effects of that poorly drafted legislation.

In a telephone interview, Lashback's Phillips says companies that provide suppression lists to affiliates should, at a minimum, seed the lists with

"decoy" addresses so privacy violators can be identified.

Although this could get a dishonest affiliate banned, it wouldn't help those whose addresses were turned over to spammers. A better solution, perhaps, is for companies to contract with go-between services that can "scrub" their affiliate lists. That way, the addresses on the unsubscribe list never get into spammer hands. The leading third-party scrubbing service is [UnsubCentral](#), an online e-mail service provider Skylist.

Despite the bad apples, Lashback's methodical testing of unsubscribe lists shows that about 92.5 percent of them are trustworthy and don't lead to spam.

To find out whether a particular unsub form can be trusted or not, enter the domain name of the particular site into Lashback's free lookup form:

www.lashback.com/UnsubsafeSearch.aspx

If a newsletter comes from a legitimate publisher, you should always use the unsubscribe mechanism. But you should never enter an address into unsubscribe forms that are friendly to spammers.

Fortunately, with Lashback's new lookup tool, it's now easy to tell the difference.

In addition to writing a column for JupiterWeb's [Datamation](#), where this story first appeared, Brian Livingston is the editor of [WindowsSecrets.com](#) a co-author of "Windows Me Secrets" and nine other books. Send story inquiries via his [contact](#) page.

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