



# CAPITAL LETTER

## Looking Ahead

### February Meeting— Structuring Documents for Single Sourcing

**Date:** Wednesday, February 7, 2001.

**Topic:** Structuring Your Documents to Maximize Reuse.

**Speaker:** Ginny Redish. In 1979, Ginny founded the Document Design Center at the American Institutes for Research in Washington, DC, which she directed for 13 years. There she and her colleagues studied the problems that people have with workplace documents, and helped major companies develop model print and online documentation.

In 1985, Ginny also set up one of the first independent usability test laboratories, where she and her colleagues had users come to try out interfaces and documentation for companies such as Hewlett-Packard, IBM, SAP, and Sony.

Since 1992, Ginny has been working with private companies and government agencies as a consultant in usability and documentation. Ginny is a graduate of Bryn Mawr College, and has a Ph.D. in Linguistics from Harvard.

**About the Program:** A major topic among information development managers these days is single sourcing—writing information once and using it many times. Structured documents are critical for single sourcing. In this program, Ginny Redish explores what is meant by structuring documents, why structuring is useful, and some of the concerns that writers have about structuring documents.

Even if you aren't yet considering single sourcing, you'll find that structuring documents is an extremely useful, time-saving technique. It works in traditional publishing and is useful for individual writers in any situation where they have to create the same type of document many times. It is essential for teams of writers who are contributing parts to a large document or to a set of documents. Single sourcing is good for companies because it creates a consistent look and feel throughout a document set; this promotes an image of competency.

Although there are many commercial products on the market that facilitate single sourcing and content management, Ginny will not address them. Rather, informational and promotional materials from some of the most popular vendors will be available.

## On the Agenda

### January Program: Help!

**Date:** Tuesday, January 16, 2001.

**Topic:** The Evolving World of Software User Assistance.

**Speaker:** Joe Welinske, President of WinWriters.

**About the program:** The opportunities for technical communicators in providing support for software applications continue to grow. As technologies in the computer arena evolve, so do the skills required to create effective software user assistance. Joe's presentation will offer a review of the current state of affairs and provide insights on the roles you'll be expected to fill in the coming months and years. The session will highlight techniques and technologies like browser-based Help, embedded Help, and XML, and discuss the increasing role of technical writers in the development of the software user interface. You will also have a brief look at some of the latest online Help design models from Microsoft, Macromedia, Apple, and other prominent software companies.

Don't forget your business cards for networking and books for the book drive!

**About the speaker:** Joe Welinske is President of WinWriters, a Seattle company that trains technical communicators who specialize in software user assistance. WinWriters produces the annual WinWriters Online Help Conference in Seattle as well as conferences in Boston, Europe, and Australia. Joe has been involved with technical communication for over 18 years. He has a B.S. in computer engineering (University of Illinois) and a M.S. in instructional design (Loyola University). He has taught online Help at the University of Washington and University of California, Santa Cruz. Joe co-authored *Developing Online Help for Windows 95* and publishes *The Online Help Journal*.

**Schedule:** Registration: 6:00-6:30 p.m.; dinner: 6:30-7:00 p.m.; program: 7:00-8:30 p.m.

**Food:** A dinner buffet with meat and vegetarian selections, vegetables, bread, dessert, and caffeinated and decaffeinated beverages.

**Cost:** \$7.50 for students, \$7.50 for DC Online SIG members with advance reservations, \$15 for STC members with advance reservations, \$18 for nonmembers and walk-ins.

**Reservations:** Advance reservations are requested by January 11. No-shows who reserve in advance will be billed. To reserve, complete the online reservation form

Washington, DC Chapter **Capital Letter**

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The Capital Letter is published ten times per year by the Washington, DC Chapter of the Society for Technical Communication. Its purpose is to inform chapter members about special functions and regular activities of the chapter and society, as well as to provide articles and essays in the field of technical communication. Material for publication should be submitted to

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## Looking for a Job?

If you need job listings, you may

- Visit our website at [http://www.stc.org/region2/wdc/www/jobs\\_1.shtml](http://www.stc.org/region2/wdc/www/jobs_1.shtml). If you don't have access to the web, try your local library for web access. More and more libraries are providing some type of Internet access.
- You can download a text file of the job announcement lists or get a textfile by e-mail from [http://www.stc.org/region2/wdc/www/jobs\\_listings.shtml](http://www.stc.org/region2/wdc/www/jobs_listings.shtml).

To request a list by e-mail, send mail as follows:

To: lockley@lockley.net Subject: WDC jobs list1

To: lockley@lockley.net Subject: WDC jobs list2

To: lockley@lockley.net Subject: WDC jobs list3

- Call Ann Ray at 301-384-1425 x342 and ask her to send you a hard copy. ✉

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## Public Relations (PR) Mailing List (listserv)

The Public Relations (PR) Mailing List (listserv) is for notifying chapter members about chapter meetings, events, and related information. We use this mailing list to improve communications to our members about chapter events and also reduce the cost for mailing announcements and reminders to the nearly 700 members in our chapter. The name of the mailing list is stcwcw-pr. Commands may be sent by e-mail or by using the Web page at <http://lists.stc.org/cgi-bin/lyris.pl?enter=stcwcw-pr>.

To subscribe by e-mail, send an e-mail message to [lyris@stc.org](mailto:lyris@stc.org). Put nothing or a dummy word in the subject line, and only the following words in the body of the message (anything else will confuse the program):

subscribe stcwcw-pr your name

To unsubscribe by e-mail, send an e-mail message to [lyris@stc.org](mailto:lyris@stc.org). Put nothing or a dummy word in the subject line, and only the following words in the body of the message (anything else will confuse the program):

unsubscribe stcwcw-pr youruserid@youraddress

To post a message: Send an e-mail message to [stcwcw-pr@stc.org](mailto:stcwcw-pr@stc.org). (Do Not include graphic or document attachments—these are binary items and they get converted to unreadable code.)

More details are provided for the listserv at

<http://www.stc.org/region2/wdc/www/listserv.shtml>. ✉

## Where Are You?

If you change your address or phone number, please let STC headquarters know by sending an e-mail message to [membership@stc-va.org](mailto:membership@stc-va.org). Keeping this information up to date helps keep down our mailing costs. ✉

at [http://www.stc.org/region2/wdc/www/mtg\\_reserve\\_jan01.shtml](http://www.stc.org/region2/wdc/www/mtg_reserve_jan01.shtml) and send a check payable to STC Washington, DC Chapter to: Carolyn Kelley Klinger, 18221 Paladin Drive, Olney MD 20832.

**Place:** Booz-Allen and Hamilton Inc. Conference Room, 2nd floor, 8283 Greensboro Drive, McLean, VA 22102; phone: 703-902-5000. The building sits on the corner of Greensboro and Solutions Drives (8283 Greensboro Drive). Visitor parking is available in designated areas in front of the building. All visitors must sign in at the reception desk in the main lobby. For directions, see the Web site or the November *Capital Letter*.

**Questions?** For more information, send Carolyn e-mail at [carolyn.klinger@mindspring.com](mailto:carolyn.klinger@mindspring.com) or call her at 301-795-0132 (work). ✉

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## Chapter's Strategic Plan Under Way

by Janet Scharp

The Washington, DC Chapter's new Strategic Planning Committee—consisting of Mary Wise, Carolyn Kelley Klinger, Susan Grodsky, and Janet Scharp—met early in November to draft a three-year strategic plan for our chapter. (A last-minute commitment prevented committee member Tracey Chiricosta from attending.) With the help of Chris Benz, our Region 2 Director Sponsor, we had obtained several strategic plans from other STC chapters, which committee members reviewed before the meeting.

In developing our chapter's plan, the committee used input from these other plans and also followed a guideline defined in a past issue of *Intercom*. They defined the chapter's mission and goals, determined chapter strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats, then established several objectives for the next three years. Finally, they determined some strategies and tactics to meet the objectives, and decided on the year (2001, 2002, or 2003) when work will be completed. After the meeting, the committee manager (Janet) typed the draft plan and sent it to committee members for review, then presented it to the extended administrative council for their input and suggestions.

The plan is currently still undergoing review. The committee hopes that the council will approve a final version in the next few months, thus giving our chapter a consistent direction for the next few years. ✉

Don't forget your business cards for networking, and please bring books for the book drive!

**Schedule:** Registration, cash bar opens: 6:00-6:30 p.m.; dinner and networking: 6:30-7:00 p.m.; program: 7:00-8:30 p.m.

**Food:** Hot sub fillings (both vegetarian and meat-based) served from chafing dishes with sub rolls, parmesan cheese, pasta salad, dessert bar platter, and beverages. Actual hot sub selections will be ordered in units of 10, and will be based on the number of attendees and their selections on the online reservation form.

**Cost:** \$7.50 for students, \$7.50 for DC Usability SIG members with advance reservations, \$15 for STC members with advance reservations, \$18 for nonmembers and walk-ins.

**Reservations:** Advance reservations are requested by February 2, 2001. No-shows who reserve in advance will be billed. To reserve, complete the online reservation form at [http://www.stc.org/region2/wdc/www/mtg\\_reserve\\_feb01.shtml](http://www.stc.org/region2/wdc/www/mtg_reserve_feb01.shtml) and send a check payable to STC Washington, DC Chapter to Carolyn Kelley Klinger, 18221 Paladin Drive, Olney MD 20832.

**Place:** Hughes Network Systems, 100 Lakeforest Boulevard, Gaithersburg, MD 20877; phone: 301-212-7930.

**Directions:** *By car:* From the Beltway (I-495), follow Interstate 270 North (toward Frederick) for about 15 miles. From 270 North take Exit 11, Montgomery Village Avenue. Merge onto Montgomery Village Avenue from ramp, cross Route 355 (Frederick Avenue), and at the next light, Russell Avenue, turn right (Lake Forest Mall is on your left). Make your first right into the parking lot at the Hughes Network Systems Lake Forest Facility (LFF).

**Questions?** For more information, e-mail Carolyn at [carolyn.klinger@mindspring.com](mailto:carolyn.klinger@mindspring.com), or call her at 301-795-0132 (work). ✉

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# November Meeting Review— User-Centered Design 101: Bringing Usability to a Product Near You

by Scott McDaniel

At the November STC meeting, speaker Whitney Quesenbery made the case that “usability” is the result not of just a few tests done toward the end of the product development cycle, but rather of a complete methodology that plugs into traditional product development.

Whitney has 10 years of experience in design and documentation, and is Senior Vice President for Design for Cognetics Corporation. She was instrumental in the development of Hyperties®, a hypertext documentation environment and precursor to the World Wide Web’s hypertext environment, and she has consulted for such clients as Lucent, IBM, ADP, the U.S. Postal Service, Union Carbide, and Hewlett-Packard. Whitney is the manager of the STC Usability SIG, and she will join the Usability Professional Association’s board of directors in January 2001.

Beginning her talk by making the case for the inclusion of usability methods in the development process, Whitney cited the top three criteria for success according to CIOs: user involvement, executive management support, and a clear statement of requirements. Usability must be built into a product from the inside out, not applied to a product at the last minute to clean up its user interface. In the same way that a coat of paint won’t make up for a faulty transmission, attractive screens cannot compensate for structural flaws in software. Building usability in from the beginning eliminates the need for good documentation to apologize for poor design in a product.

Good software and documentation are characterized by “the five Es of usability.” Usable software is:

1. *Efficient*: the speed at which people can accurately complete their tasks
2. *Effective*: the accuracy and completeness with which people can achieve their goals
3. *Engaging*: the pleasantness of the user experience
4. *Error tolerant*: the ability of the software to prevent errors, or the ease with which people can recover from errors
5. *Easy to learn*: the ease with which people can learn the software initially, and the ability to learn advanced tasks

A typical development process is linear. The team usually receives its mandate from management. Team members may or may not consult with users while defining the set of requirements (formally or informally). Then the team builds and releases the software. A user-centered design (UCD) approach modifies this basic process by validating key design decisions with users. In a UCD project, the team observes people in the context of their work to understand their environment and requirements for

success. It then creates a conceptual model for the user interface that matches how real people work, and finally the team conducts user evaluations with early prototypes before the long and costly build stage.

Essentially, a UCD project begins with the team learning about the users. Team members use that knowledge to create a design prototype. After testing the prototype with users (not managers, marketing, or anyone else), they know whether the prototype needs further revision. If so, they do another design and testing iteration. This process continues until either the prototype is OK or the schedule does not allow further testing. Only after all of this does the build stage begin.

Note that the information that the team gathers about the users is critical not only to the product designers, but also to you, the technical writer, who must understand your audience. This information will help you determine the whole approach to documentation. You can use it to determine your writing style, whether you will provide quick-reference cards, and whether your users need hard-copy documentation in addition to online help.

Cognetics’ approach to user-centered design is LUCID: Logical User-Centered Interaction Design. When a project team adapts LUCID to its needs, it goes through several stages:

1. *Envision*: the team creates a vision statement for the product and the user interface
2. *Analyze*: the team determines the user requirements through direct observation
3. *Design*: the team creates a prototype of key screens
4. *Evaluate and refine*: the team tests the designs with users and completes the detailed design
5. *Implement*: the team builds the product for release
6. *Support*: the team provides roll-out support for users

The goal of the **Envision** and **Analyze** stages is to clearly define what the project should accomplish, from both a business standpoint and a user standpoint. The deliverables for these two stages present an overall statement of purpose for the product, and then they document the key roles in the project team (Envision) and among the users (Analyze). The analysis—through scenarios, use cases, and user archetypes—presents a clear picture of the user and guides the team through all subsequent stages.

The **Design** process results in a prototype that accomplishes two important functions. The prototype must present the key parts of the product in such a way that the designers can test it with users, and it must be visible to management as progress on the project and give them a sense of its general direction. Once a basic design is complete, the **Evaluate and Refine** process loops the designers back into the Analyze and Design stages. While the initial analysis stage focused on general knowledge of the users’ work, now the designers collect specific information about how users interact with the prototype. That knowledge drives further design changes until the proposed design has met its usability goals.

The **Implement** and **Support** stages are opportunities to clearly document the usability victories in the project and sell them to other teams and managers, as well as

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Continued on page 5

the users themselves. User data and usability discoveries potentially apply to many projects, not just a single effort. Technical writers, trainers, tech support, and marketing all have a stake in a product's usability, and the methods used to achieve that usability can form a bridge to connect these key areas.

*Scott McDaniel works with Whitney Quesenbery at Cognetics Corporation, a software and Web user-centered design company based in Princeton, NJ. Scott works in Cognetics' Silver Spring office. ✍*

## Consensus Meeting Complete

*by David Kindle*

On December 2, the judges for the 2000-2001 Technical Publications Competition met to discuss this year's excellent entries. STC was fortunate again this year to have the facilities of EEI Communications available. I would like to thank EEI again for their generosity and Melissa Brown for organizing the meeting.

The judges received certificates of appreciation for their efforts. After all, without the judges, the competition would not be possible. We rely on the judges' expertise in the field to provide our entrants with instructive comments. Most of this year's judges arrived at the consensus meeting with an idea of which entries deserved awards. This helps the process, and enables the judges to simply decide on which entries warrant the honor of best of show. I am pleased to announce that we decided on winners without having to "recount" the votes several times!

We had several excellent entries this year. We will be sending these entries on to the international competition, and hope they will find the entries as exceptional as we did.

The judges' comments are currently being mailed to entrants, as well as winners' notifications. We hope to see everyone at the awards banquet this year! The banquet will be held on March 1 at the Sheraton in Tysons Corner, VA. Banquet invitations will be mailed shortly.

Again, I would like to thank my committee for their diligent efforts. Volunteer work is exciting and rewarding when you see how people can come together for a common cause. The teamwork and leadership that everyone on the committee has shown is outstanding and much appreciated. ✍

## New Senior Members Named

Congratulations to the following members, who recently achieved Senior Member status:

George F. Athey  
Lynda D. Balthrop  
Pamela C. Bloom  
Shannon L. Dennett  
Susan L. Gay  
Randall G. Gentry  
Lisa L. Gillespie  
Allan J. Keaton  
Carol E. Laumeier  
Sue Mosher  
Christine S. Moulton  
Elizabeth R. Pass  
Donna Mayo Regan  
Kimberly A. Reisler  
Diane C. Williams ✍

## DC Online SIG Comes Out of Retirement

The DC Online SIG is coming out of retirement for a special engagement! Joe Welinske, President of WinWriters, is coming to DC to speak about "The Evolving World of Software User Assistance" on Tuesday, January 16.

This is a joint meeting of the DC Online SIG and the STC Washington, DC Chapter, and includes dinner. If you're a SIG member, sign up now and attend for \$7.50, half off the regular price!

For details and to sign up, see the article on page 1, [http://www.stc.org/region2/wdc/www/thismonth\\_jan01.shtml](http://www.stc.org/region2/wdc/www/thismonth_jan01.shtml), and [http://www.stc.org/region2/wdc/www/mtg\\_reserve\\_jan01.shtml](http://www.stc.org/region2/wdc/www/mtg_reserve_jan01.shtml). ✍

# Designing Your Web Site for the Blind

by Guy Ball, Senior Member, OCSTC

You might wonder about the logic of designing a Web site for the blind and visually impaired. After all, Web designers seem to be moving toward visually rich sites that often embrace some sort of flash and dazzle to keep viewers interested—or at least to point them in the direction that they need on the site.

Yet those of us who are fully sighted forget that as we make the Web our main information vehicle, we may be cutting out millions of customers or potential customers. And these millions (5 to 10 million in the U.S. alone, by some estimates) have every moral and legal right to have access to that information.

For instance, Unisys has support sites where we post our latest documentation. We have scores of sales and marketing sites with information on our latest products.

Are these sites accessible to an audience (blind or visually impaired) that cannot actually see the site but can only “read” it through the use of special software?

Obviously, the implication is even greater for consumer sites like Amazon.com or Buy.com. Are they ready to ignore a few hundred thousand customers who would use their site—but can’t because of poor or incomplete design? If these companies were to change their site design, even slightly, they might gain 50,000, maybe 100,000, new customers, all because their site design *encouraged* rather than *discouraged* viewers with impairments. And many of these impaired viewers stay loyal once they find a site that works well for them.

A recent article in *PC World* magazine (September 2000) compared two sites using screen-reader software. The first, Hewlett-Packard, did well. All links worked properly and were easily recognizable (Investor Information, Drivers, HP Store, for example). Then the writer visited the Gap Online. Many of the links sounded like programming gibberish (Link, shorts\_men.asp?wdid=300, Map: wdid=301, Map:gapstore/cs\_returns.asp). One would suspect that from this, the Gap has lost a large number of potential customers who will never return to the site.

## The Problems

The blind and visually impaired use what are called screen readers to navigate the Web. These software programs look at the HTML file that creates a Web page on a computer. Then they synthetically speak exactly what that file tells them. The better readers will ignore or “understand” specialized HTML codes and speak the content that a sighted Web viewer would see. The result is content as accessible to a blind person as to a fully-sighted one. At least that is the desired result.

Problems occur when the Web designer includes graphics. If the navigation bar has the text link “software downloads,” the screen reader will speak those words. But if the navigation bar uses graphic buttons with no “alt text” description, the reader will ignore it or just speak the word “graphic.” If that’s the case, the visitor is now lost on the page and will not know where to go next.

In other situations, poor or incomplete HTML formatting will confuse the reading software, causing it to skip content and links. Animation will cause the screen reader to jump around within text on a page, pulling words from different parts of the page and making nonsensical sentences.

## The Law

In the United States, we’re starting to see the impact of three laws: the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), Section 508 of the Rehabilitation Act, and Section 255 of the Telecommunications Act. More on these laws and their impact can be found at the Microsoft.com site (among others), but they are important for us all—especially when we deal with the federal government (Section 508, particularly). Companies such as AOL, H&R Block, Intuit (Quicken), and Bank of America have already been subject to government and legal action.

## Are Ugly, Text-Only Sites the Answer?

No, and neither is a duplicate page with no graphics. There are some very easy things that we, as Web designers, can do to make a graphics page work for the blind. Most include using the tools we already have to add some alternate text. Others are just a change in habits, with us doing something a bit different. With a little retraining, we can produce an accessible page with little additional work.

## How to Fix it

Here are a few quick tips. There isn’t space in this article to give details or specific examples for each tip, so I recommend that you check out the sites listed under Additional Information.

- *Images and animation.* Use the alt text or alt attribute function to clearly describe the function of each visual.
- *Image maps.* Use client-side Map and use alt text for hotspots.
- *Multimedia.* Provide a text description of video content.
- *Page organization.* Use consistent structure and cascading style sheets (CSS) for layout and style when possible. This enables users to modify their browser at one time to affect their entire visit on the site.
- *Formatting options.* Use heading tags with font attributes rather than calling out specific fonts in each usage. This enables visually-impaired viewers to modify styles and font sizes to meet their needs.
- *JavaScript, applets, and animation.* Provide alternative content in case the active features are not accessible through the screen reading software.
- *Check your work!* Try using the validation tools, checklists, and guidelines available at sites like <http://www.w3c.org/TR/WCAG/>

## Additional Information

The following sites offer quite a wealth of information, as well as good examples and tips:

- IBM Accessibility Center (with downloadable trial version of their Home Page Reader), <http://www-3.ibm.com/able/overview.html/>.

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- SSB Technologies (Web Site Accessibility), <http://www.ssbtechnologies.com/accessibility.php/>.
- Adobe Access for People with Visual Disabilities (and information on PDF accessibility), <http://access.adobe.com/>.
- Microsoft Accessibility (Web Guidelines), <http://www.microsoft.com/enable/dev/web/default.htm/>.
- Center for Applied Special Technology (CAST) offering Bobby, a free program to check your site's HTML code, <http://www.cast.org/bobby/>.
- Designing More Usable Web Sites (from the University of Wisconsin at Madison), <http://trace.wisc.edu/world/web/>.
- Web Accessibility Initiative (W3C), <http://www.w3.org/WAI/EO/Drafts/WAI-homeA.html/>.

*Guy is a senior technical writer and information engineer with Unisys in Mission Viejo, CA. When he isn't hard at work writing Unisys hardware documentation, Guy has been writing on Web accessibility for CityLine and enablelink.com. He is working on an expanded version of this story for the STC publication, Intercom. He is the Webmaster for [www.SantaAnaHistory.com/](http://www.SantaAnaHistory.com/) which is "Bobby approved." Guy has also just completed his third book, Santa Ana in Vintage Postcards, to be published by Arcadia in January 2001. He can be reached at [mrcalc@usa.net](mailto:mrcalc@usa.net).*

Editor's Note: The mission of the Society for Technical Communication's Special Needs Committee (SNC) is to help members with special needs achieve their potential. We accomplish this by making available to them information about products, services, and literature that can assist them in their career activities. Information and resources for special needs are available from the SNC Web site and includes a section on Internet Accessibility. The SNC Web site is available at [http://stc.org/pics/special\\_needs/](http://stc.org/pics/special_needs/). ✍

## Letters

The following letter was received by Carolyn Kelley Klinger, our Programs Manager.

*Dear Carolyn,*

*I'm a member of the ID SIG who hasn't attended an STC program in a coon's age and I'm really excited about Ginny Redish (former head of Information Design Center, as I recall) in February. I wanted you to know that this is inspiring me to contemplate renewing my STC membership in February; I was considering not renewing.*

*Suzanne Snell Tesh*

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## SIGDOC Offers Undergraduate Scholarship

The Association for Computing Machinery (ACM) Special Interest Group for Documentation (SIGDOC) is accepting applications for a 2001 undergraduate scholarship. The scholarship is to assist a student who is pursuing an established degree program in an area of technical or professional communication. One nonrenewable scholarship of \$500 will be granted toward school tuition and expenses. The award will be paid directly to the school for crediting to the student's account.

For more information and the application forms, see the SIGDOC Web site at <http://www.acm.org/sigdoc/Scholarship.html>. Applications must be postmarked no later than February 17, 2001.

SIGDOC is a society of students, experienced practitioners, and academics dedicated to furthering the technical communication profession. Members are from all technical and scientific disciplines, those who create documentation in the computing community, and those who use computers to create documentation in many styles and media. ✍

# From the President

## New Year's Resolution—Get Rid of It. But How do I Get Rid of It?! Part 1- Getting and Reporting Spam

by Cynthia Lockley

Whether you are opening mail your postal person left at your door or electronic mail you get online, you will undoubtedly see similar messages and fantastic claims.

<<E-Mail Money Machine>> \$10 For Every E-Mail You Send!

**\*\*EXPLOSIVE WORK FROM HOME BUSINESS\*\***

ATTENTION GOLF LOVERS!....

STAY HOME AND MAKE \$100 A DAY!

I am a registered stockbroker in the states of CA, CO, CT, DE, FL, GA, HI, IL, LA, MD, MA, MI, NJ, NY, OH, PA, TX, & VA.

Some people actually like spam and enjoy getting it (or eating it). The barrage of junk mail that fills up our electronic and snail mailboxes, though, annoys most of us. Unfortunately there is no way to stop the stuff from being sent to us, but we can control the spam we get and decrease its impact on our time and storage space. And in some cases, you can even fight back.

The spammers' philosophy: "We stand for Freedom of the Press, Freedom of Speech, and the Free Enterprise System that made America Great !!"

The spammer's philosophy: "STOP. I don't want your junk cluttering up my space!"

First, a basic rule to remember:

Problem: Some electronic spam comes with the following statement or similar words: "To be removed from this mailing list, simply press reply and type 'Remove' in the subject or message area. No other words or messages, please, or it won't remove you!"

Notice the neat trick they have here. Many e-mail applications require at least one character in the body of any message you send out. So you can't follow the instructions for removal even if you wanted to try it.

Basic Rule: Don't do it! It only verifies that your e-mail address is valid. Never respond to a junk mailer's "Remove" address. It's a sucker list address and gets you put on more spam lists.

A great deal of the junk e-mail and usenet abuse reported is generated using false or manipulated return addresses and, in fact, does not originate from the domain name used in the "Reply to" or "From" lines. In most cases, you can use the full headers (including the Received: lines) to discern its true origin. Many e-mail applications truncate this information but you can get to the full data. For example, in Eudora, get the full header by clicking on the "Blah, Blah, Blah" button. With usenet you can use the NNTP posting host: IP address or host name.

There's a spiffy Web site that will let you paste in the full header from any e-mail you receive and it will analyze those headers and, with a fair amount of accuracy, tell you where the e-mail came from. You must do this within 3 days of receiving the spam. It's not perfect (what is?), but for those of you who haven't learned the intricacies of interpreting the headers yourself, it's a useful substitute. You can find the website at <http://www.spamcop.net/>

Paste the whole message in. You don't have to register with SpamCop to just use the tool to track where the spam came from. This tool isn't perfect because it sometimes ends up telling you to complain to the person who sent it to you and you don't want to do that—that just verifies that your e-mail address is valid so they can send you more junk. Send your complaint to the other addresses suggested and omit the spammer's address.

It is best to forward all spam to the FTC's Internet Fraud department (add "unsolicited e-mail spam . . ." on the Subject line in front of the subject). See the resource list below for e-mail addresses and URLs.

You can also copy the responsible abuse department of the domain where the spam was sent from that is identified in the spamcop tool (such as abuse@erols.com, abuse@uu.net, or abuse@prodigy.net). You may get back a ticket assignment to show they are working on it and they often thank you for notifying them. Some even follow up with a report that they canceled the offending account or that it has already been reported and canceled. In most cases they won't be responsible for sending the spam, but they do like to know when people are using their address fraudulently and most will pursue the culprit to get them shut down.

Don't take a guilt trip—some spammers even try to make you feel guilty about reporting them: "Please understand that any effort to disrupt, close or block this Remove account can only result in difficulties for others wanting to be removed from our mailing list." Don't feel guilty. You will actually save those people by closing down the account. Their replies won't get on more "verified as valid" spam lists.

And don't believe claims that say they filtered the list against bulk mail remove lists and you weren't on it, so therefore they're sending you this mail. They don't exist except for verifying that your address is valid.

The National Fraud Information Center (NFIC) and Internet Fraud Watch (IFW) provide advice about telephone and Internet solicitations and relay consumer's reports of possible fraud to law enforcement authorities. Those agencies may contact you directly if they need more details. The information you provide is crucial in law enforcement efforts to identify fraudulent schemes and shut them down.

Once you've been targeted for fraud, you may hear from other fraudulent companies. Don't let a criminal into your home by phone or computer line! Con artists may even pretend to be working with law enforcement and offer to get your money back—for a fee. Remember, government agencies don't charge to assist consumers.

Helpful resources:

AT&T Fraud Line at 800-337-5373

National Fraud Information Center (NFIC)/Internet Fraud Watch (IFW): National Fraud Information Center, PO Box 65868, Washington, DC 20035; <http://www.fraud.org/> and <http://www.fraud.org/internet/intset.htm>; e-mail: [nfic@internetmci.com](mailto:nfic@internetmci.com); also see <http://www.fraud.org/internet/intinfo.htm> and <http://www.fraud.org/welcome.htm>; 800-876-7060, Monday through Friday, from 9:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m. Eastern time

Online Incident Report Form: <http://63.219.198.195/repoform.htm>

Federal Trade Commission: [uce@ftc.gov](mailto:uce@ftc.gov)

For tips about fraud you can report, go to

Telemarketing fraud: <http://www.fraud.org/telemarketing/teletips/tipmenu.htm>

Internet tips: <http://www.fraud.org/internet/inttip/inttip.htm>

Federal Trade Commission brochures: <http://www.ftc.gov/ftc/consumer.htm>

United States Postal Inspection Service: <http://www.usps.gov/websites/depart/inspect/> or [fraud@uspis.gov](mailto:fraud@uspis.gov)

Internet Fraud Complaint Center (IFCC), FBI: <https://www.ifccfbi.gov/complaint/default.asp>

Security Exchange Commission (SEC): [enforcement@sec.gov](mailto:enforcement@sec.gov)

SpamCop: <http://www.spamcop.net/>

<http://www.junkbusters.com/>: This company hopes to make a business out of helping computer users tell online marketing firms what they want to receive or don't want to receive.

Additional URLs and e-mail addresses you can use to report spam are listed on <http://www.elsop.com/wrc/complain.htm>.

Also check out the various links on <http://www.elsop.com/wrc/nospam.htm>

Start the New Year off right—resolve to fight back! ✉

CAPITAL LETTER

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