Chapter XIV

User Perceptions of the Usefulness of E-Mail and Instant Messaging

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Abstract

This chapter describes research that explores the impact of unsolicited traffic on the perceived usefulness of electronic message technologies. Two technologies were explored: e-mail and instant messaging. The hypothesis is that unsolicited message traffic would have negative effects on the perceived usefulness of the technologies. However, the findings did not support this expected result. Users of the technologies appear to cope with the unsolicited traffic in a variety of ways. The implications of results are discussed from the perspective of managers, researchers, marketers, service providers, and public policy makers.
Introduction

Using electronic message technologies has become a way of life for many. In the modern workplace, people routinely communicate with each other using a computer in addition to, or instead of, a telephone. Many workers spend a significant fraction of their day producing and processing electronic messages. Outside of the workplace, many use their personal computer to communicate with their family and their friends. In both contexts, such communication facilitated by the Internet spans the globe.

The oldest electronic message technology is e-mail. E-mail began more than 40 years ago when users of time-shared mainframe computer systems wanted to communicate with each other. With the widespread use of the Internet, e-mail has become a standard for communication between its users. As a result, e-mail is typically used as a replacement for a variety of documents such as memorandum, letters, or reports.

Today, e-mail can be sent literally to anyone or everyone. All that is required is that the sender has the needed electronic address or addresses. The marginal cost increase to send an e-mail message to a large number of recipients is hardly more than sending to one recipient. This exceedingly minimal incremental cost of sending e-mail messages to many recipients has lead to a phenomenon called spam.

Spam is typically defined as the sending of unsolicited, identical, or nearly identical, messages to a large number of recipients (Wikipedia, 2006). Historically, the idea of spam has been described with a variety of message technologies, one of which includes e-mail. However, for purposes of our discussion here, spam is a descriptor of a class of messages that are unsolicited and are sent to a large number of recipients via the e-mail system.

Over the years there have been, and continue to be, a variety of electronic communication technologies that are employed in addition to e-mail. One of the more recent electronic communications technologies is instant messaging (IM). Instant messaging is a form of electronic communication that involves immediate exchange of messages between two or more users who are simultaneously connected with each other. Typically, messages are brief, which means they can be composed quickly and, when completed, can be delivered very quickly across the network to connected users, perhaps in a fraction of a second. The overall flow of messages between the simultaneously connected parties functions much like, and often is called, a chat session or chat room.

The popularity of instant messaging was probably best demonstrated by the success of America Online (AOL) and its instant messaging product. Other companies, including Yahoo and Microsoft, have comparable and competing products. The basic idea behind all of these products is an easy-to-use interface that connects the user to a server that provides access to the network via a username and simultaneously connects the user to other users via their usernames. Once connected, all users can “message” each other, that is, send short message of text directly to other connected users.

Instant messaging differs from e-mail as follows: E-mail messages may be lengthy, are sent across the network, and are queued for the recipient. The recipient need not be connected at the time the message is sent and/or arrives. The recipient reads the message, potentially at a much later time, and the transmission latency may be minutes, hours, or days. In contrast, instant messages are short and are immediately sent across the network to a simultaneously
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