

Grab Your Online Prize...

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by

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Grab Your Online Prize...

One of the less fortunate phenomena of the Internet age is 'spam'. We're not talking canned meat here, of course, but junk email advertising everything under the sun and quite a few things besides. It's easy to get spammed. Just leave your email address on a message board or chat room and wait for the spammers' software programs to trawl through and pick it up.

As a regular user of message boards, I've been able to become something of an aficionado of spam. These things, of course, work on the basis that the spammers send out untold numbers of unsolicited emails in the hope that one in a million will result in a sale. Naturally, a good proportion of these unsolicited mails come from sex sites. (Yes, they *are* unsolicited. Honest, dear.) Typically, they promise to make me irresistible to women or, with commendable open-mindedness about my sexual orientation, to expand my bustline. Quite a few *really* want to show me naughty pictures and the some of these *really* scale the heights of optimism. Yes, they tell me breathlessly, they can offer me free access to any number of saucy sites! Yes, absolutely free! They'll give me a password that'll get me in anywhere! Absolutely free! All I have to do to get my absolutely free access is give them proof of my identity by... wait for it... sending them my credit card number.

Um, yesssss. Did I say one in a million?

Many of these people are desperate to have me just open one of their mails. They try headings that they hope will lure me in. 'Sorry I missed you last night.' 'In reply to your query.' And my personal favourite: 'It was wonderful to meet you last night and sample the delights of your fabulously masculine body. Please call me at once so we can do it again.' OK, I made that last one up but you get the picture.

On a similar theme, it seems I enter lots of contests without even knowing. Most days I get told I'm shortlisted for a fantastic holiday in the Caribbean or that I've been specially selected out of millions to receive a new Mercedes with gold-plated door handles and a sackful of dosh in the boot. These guys are just longing to give me a fortune every day of the week, and twice on Sundays. All I've got to do to claim my prize is give them proof of my identity by, yup, sending them my credit card number.

While I'm trying to work out what to do with my previously-unimagined riches, I can also give some thought to improving my qualifications. Last week, some helpful educational establishment sent me an email offering me my choice of degree, based on my 'extensive experience of life', from a 'prestigious but unaccredited' US university. Then, just when I was wondering whether I should settle for a humble BA or pay a bit more and get a master's or even a PhD, I got distracted by something even better. 'Join Us in Serving God!!!' screamed the title. The people behind this one are way beyond cut-price degrees. These guys want to ordain me as a minister in their church! As proof of their deep spiritual concern for my future, they enthuse about the opportunities open to certified ministers. All over the world, it seems, people are getting born, baptized and married. They're dying, too! And each of these life events gets marked by a church service! And someone pays for each of these services! And the person getting paid could easily be me! I could even get tax breaks while I'm raking it in! Yes, I can become a man of the cloth just as soon as I... wait for it... send them my credit card number.

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Of course, some of the spams I get are a little more personalized. Being a writer, my email addresses are listed on a number of authors' sites where they obviously attract interest from like-minded souls. So, I get warm invitations like the one from an Asian gentleman who wants to share the 'overwhelming news' that he's just published a book of poems. He would, he writes, be 'insurmountably obliged' if I took some time to check out his work, explaining 'its (sic) in fact a profound dedication to my Mother, whose immortal essence, I want to ubiquitously propagate all across the colossal Universe.' At least he's considerate. He wants me to buy his book, he writes, is so it will 'bless my countenance with incomprehensible happiness'.

Meanwhile, the spams continue to stream in. A bunch seem to originate from a 'non-profit making agency' that wants to help me get out of debt. It seems they can consolidate my loans, renegotiate my liabilities and reangle my financial finagles. At the end of it all, the banks will end up owing me squillions, rather than the other way around. And there's more. I can get government grants that I'll never have to repay (exclusive to just me and 12 million other people). I can make a fortune (yes, another one) working from home. I can check out celebs in compromising poses. I can snoop on my friends' personal lives and even get a better signal when they call me on my cell phone to complain. And then there's the ultimate spam mail. All I've got to do is subscribe to these guys' services and they'll send me lists of totally kosher email addresses so I can send my very own spams to millions of deserving recipients.

And all these offerings are completely free, so all I have to do to is send them... Well, you know the rest.

Mind you, I still think there are opportunities out there. The spammers can help us to reinvent our bodies, careers and educations, for example, but their imaginations still seem a tad limited to me. Here's one that appeals to me. Why not go the whole hog and reinvent our surroundings? I'm sure if the Inland Revenue were willing to give me tax breaks as a minister of the church, they'd be even more impressed to discover I now live in an independent country...

The writer will be pleased to reply to your questions about spam. Just write to:

The Right Reverend Dr. Sir Michael Cartlidge, OBE, MA and Bar, Fellow
of the Royal Society of Obstetricians (Gondwanaland),

The Royal Palace of Magnificent Incredibleness,

Independent Republic of Taipahe.

(This is an absolutely free service but please don't forget to enclose your credit card number.)

END