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Advertising On Usenet

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ADVERTISING ON USENET

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In response to the wave of commercialism inundating the Internet in 1994, Joel K. Furr put together this FAQ (Frequently Asked Questions) in November 1995 to address the topic of advertising on Usenet newsgroups. As pointed out in Chapter 12, advertising on Usenet must be performed delicately. If you would like to contact the author of this FAQ, he can be reached at jfurr@acpub.duke.edu.

Introduction

Advertising on Usenet is a frequently misunderstood subject. The purpose of this message is to explain some Usenet conventions regarding advertising to new users and, hopefully, spare everyone involved a lot of needless worry.

To start with, let's define the term. "Usenet" is *not* synonymous with "Internet." Usenet is the system of online discussion groups, called "newsgroups," e.g., `rec.humor`, `comp.misc`, `news.announce.newusers`, `talk.origins`, `misc.rural`, `alt.sex`, and so forth.

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This FAQ does not attempt to describe in detail all the various ways in which one can conduct commercial activity over the Internet and attempts simply to explain the issues involved in advertising in Usenet newsgroups.

The Philosophy Of Usenet

Usenet started out in 1980 as a Unix network linking sites which needed to talk about and receive prompt updates on Unix system configuration and other Unix questions. Message traffic started out at a few messages per week, but the system was so useful that traffic quickly boomed and Usenet almost immediately expanded to include forums on science fiction, humans and computers, and other subjects.

In the beginning, Usenet was largely confined to educational institutions such as universities and colleges, and to research companies and other commercial enterprises with Unix machines on-site. It has now grown to include millions of users at commercial sites such as America Online and at companies around the world involved in every sort of business imaginable. Nevertheless, many of the customs found on Usenet today have their origins in the days when Usenet was very small and most Usenet sites were universities.

That these customs and traditions began when Usenet was much smaller and quite different in nature in no way lessens the anger many users feel when these customs and traditions are violated.

One such custom is the tradition and belief that it is rude to advertise for profit in Usenet newsgroups.

Advertising is widely seen as an “off-topic” intrusion into the discussions of any particular newsgroup (newsgroup is the Usenet word for discussion group or bulletin board). Each newsgroup has a specific set of subjects it is intended to cover, and in order for newsgroups to function as effective discussion forums, it is important that people stay “on-topic.” If everyone disregarded the particular topics each newsgroup is intended to cover and simply posted whatever they wanted wherever they want, the entire system would break down.

Due to the decentralized nature of Usenet, there is no one person or body which can “enforce” the custom of staying on-topic. It falls on each user to help preserve the culture of open discussion and free speech that Usenet has come to embody by not posting off-topic material.

This, of course, includes advertising. Advertising is by far the most pervasive form of off-topic posting, and therefore, gets most of the heat.

An Analogy

If an analogy will help you to visualize the situation, imagine a meeting at your workplace or school.

At this meeting, people are discussing a certain issue—for example, getting new sidewalks installed downtown or getting new schoolbooks for the elementary school, or what to do about the new product your company is planning on introducing.

In the midst of the discussions on the new sidewalks, textbooks, or product, someone walks into the room, interrupts everyone, then reads an advertisement for a local restaurant. He or she then leaves without waiting for comment.

Now imagine if this happened over and over again each time your group tried to hold a meeting. Every time someone tried to make a point, in walks some other stranger who reads an ad for some business that has nothing to do with the subject of the meeting.

It would soon become rather difficult to hold effective meetings, wouldn't it?

Similarly, it's very difficult to keep Usenet newsgroups interesting and useful when people deluge newsgroups with advertisements.

The Hidden Cost

One of the things that attracts some people to the idea of advertising via Usenet is that it costs so little to do it. You pay \$20 or \$30 per month for an Internet account, and you can post literally *millions* of advertisements at no additional cost.

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But there *is* a cost. Each message you post takes up disk space on each site around the world where it lands. People don't much mind paying for disk space to hold Usenet discussions since they know that people like taking part in those discussions and since they know that it's sort of like mutual backscratching: "I let your messages reside on my site for free, and you let the messages I post reside on your site for free." Everyone benefits from interesting, informative, or amusing discussions, so no one really minds paying for the space.

But there's only one person who benefits from advertising: the advertiser. Sure, you can say that the people who see the ad benefit from the product or service advertised, but when you balance that against what they lose when their favorite discussion group is taken over by nonstop advertising, it's a poor trade.

No one wants to give their disk space for free to someone who selfishly posts a copy of an advertisement to every newsgroup on Usenet.

How To Advertise On Usenet

There *are* acceptable ways to advertise in Usenet newsgroups.

THE ON-TOPIC NOTICE

If you have a product or a message that is specifically related to a particular Usenet newsgroup, and you want to let people know about it, it's *usually* all right to post *one* notice about it.

Note the word "notice." A notice is a brief mention of the product with information about how interested persons can find out more. It's not a sales pitch. It's not an advertisement. It's not a "BUY BUY BUY" sort of message. It's a notice.

You are encouraged to make such postings one-time-only. When your polite informational notice starts getting posted every week, people are going to start getting irked at you.

You are also *strongly* encouraged to keep such postings hype-free. What often works very well is to post information about your services or product and include a contact address, World Wide Web site, or phone number for people to use to get more information.

For example, if you want to post a notice about your immigration law services, you could post a message to `alt.visa.us` or the various `misc.immigration.*` newsgroups, where you'd find a large population of people interested in that or related subjects. Posting the same ad to `rec.sport.football.college` would *not* be appropriate because `rec.sport.football.college` has nothing to do with immigration law, visas, or becoming a citizen of another country.

One way to tell if a post is appropriate is to look at a newsgroup's charter. The charter is the formal declaration of what is on topic and what is not, and was generated at the time the group was created if the group was created in the so-called Big 7 hierarchies of `comp.*`, `soc.*`, `rec.*`, `talk.*`, `misc.*`, `news.*`, `sci.*`, and `humanities.*`. Some other groups have charters as well, but not all—and if they do, they're often one or two lines in length. Where can you find a charter? Well, in some cases the charter is regularly posted to the newsgroup or is contained in the newsgroup's Frequently Asked Questions files. In other cases, the charter has been all but forgotten. Charters can occasionally be difficult to locate, so you may have to use your best judgment and/or ask someone who's been reading the group for a while if a particular message would be appropriate.

This is not to say that on-topic notices will always be welcome; the proliferation of inappropriate advertisements (ads posted in the wrong way to the wrong place) has resulted in *all* ads, even informational notices posted to appropriate newsgroups, tending to get a cold shoulder. You can help by limiting your ads to *informational* postings posted *only where appropriate*, and abiding by any local restrictions a given newsgroup's readers have placed on advertising.

***.FORSALE AND *.MARKETPLACE NEWSGROUPS**

There are many newsgroups directly involved in selling. You can generally spot them by the word "forsale" or "marketplace" in their names.

For example, `rec.games.board.marketplace` is a newsgroup where people post for-sale and want-to-buy notices about board games they want to buy or sell.

Similarly, the `misc.forsale.*` hierarchy is full of newsgroups for buying and selling various computers, monitors, printers, devices, and so forth, as well as `misc.forsale.non-computer.*`, for selling stuff that's not computer-related. However, the

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misc.forsale.* policy is rather resistant to *commercial* ads—the hierarchy is intended as a place to post classified-style ads.

Many parts of the Net have local hierarchies as well where you can post for-sale and want-to-buy ads. For example, in central North Carolina, the **triangle.*** hierarchy has **triangle.forsale** and **triangle.wanted**, where classified-style advertisements are the rule of the day.

It's generally considered rude, though, to crosspost a notice about your product to every forsale newsgroup, even ones on the opposite side of the country or world. Post your notice only to your *local* forsale newsgroup, if one exists.

COMP.NEWPROD

If and only if you are with a computer company that is releasing a new product and you want to make word of this new product known to the computing community, you can post a notice to the moderated newsgroup **comp.newprod**. The moderator of **comp.newprod** requires submissions to be informative and hype-free so people will use **comp.newprod** as a reliable way of gaining information.

BIZ.*

There is a hierarchy of newsgroups called “biz.*” that exists mainly for announcement from companies of new products, fixes and enhancements, postings of demo software, and so forth. If your site carries **biz.***, and you feel that a **biz.*** hierarchy group would suit your purposes, go to **biz.config** and ask for it.

Be warned, though, that if your goal is to create a **biz.*** newsgroup for posting hype-filled advertisements, no one would read such a newsgroup. People only want to read newsgroups that are of benefit to them; they're not about to subscribe to a newsgroup that's nothing but ads for Bob's Bait And Tackle.

There are a few dozen **biz.*** newsgroups, some of which get used regularly and some of which are essentially defunct. If your site carries **biz.***, you can find out more about the hierarchy by asking in **biz.config**, **biz.general**, and **biz.misc**.

SIGNATURE ADVERTISEMENTS

A .signature is a mini-file that is automatically appended (stuck at the end of) to any Usenet messages that you post—regardless of what the content is. Whether or not you can create and use a .signature depends on what sort of system you're using to access Usenet news. Many UNIX systems simply require you to create a file called “.signature” in your root directory within your shell account and put whatever you want your .signature to say within that file. Other systems, like America Online, allow you to do something similar, but the implementation varies from system to system. If you can't figure out if your system supports a .signature, ask the people in charge for help.

Typically, it is considered bad manners to put more than four lines of information in your .signature, regardless of what those four lines might say or contain. Gigantic ASCII pictures of dragons, for example, are annoying when you have to see them every time a certain person posts. Similarly, it's considered bad manners to put an advertisement in your .signature and then post a lot of empty or nearly-empty articles simply to get your .signature into various newsgroups.

On the other hand, if you post meaningful, responsible messages in groups you're actually interested in, and those messages happen to have the address of your Web page tacked on at the end, few people will complain. Just keep .signature advertisements extremely short and sweet. Let your Web page contain the sales pitch—the .signature should usually be little more than a listing of your URL and perhaps a mention of what sort of business you're in.

Restraint and responsibility are everything—if you've got those, people will sit up and listen to you.

How *Not* To Advertise On Usenet

Unfortunately, there are just about as many *inappropriate* ways to advertise on Usenet as there are appropriate ways.

POSTING OFF-TOPIC MESSAGES IN UNRELATED NEWSGROUPS

Each message you post to Usenet, regardless of its content, should only be posted to related newsgroups.

For example, you run a rug company. You want to sell lots of rugs. So, you post an advertisement about your rugs in **sci.physics**. Not surprisingly, a lot of people send you email telling you what a jerk you are.

Why'd they do this, you ask? It's simple: **sci.physics** has nothing to do with selling rugs. Your ad was as off-topic as if someone had tried to get a discussion going there about the upcoming football season or started posting a lot of messages about their recent vacation.

Suppose you own that rug company, and you regularly read **rec.crafts.textiles.weaving**. Would you like it if someone started coming in and posting a lot of ads to the newsgroup about ginseng tablets, and then someone else came in and started trying to sell magazine subscriptions, and before you knew it, it became hard to find any actual discussion of weaving going on?

Try to look at it from the other person's point of view. If you'd resent someone posting an ad for *their* product to *your* favorite newsgroup, why would you post an ad for *your* product to thousands of other people's favorite newsgroups?

Remember the Golden Rule: "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you."

SPAMMING

Spamming is defined as posting identical or nearly-identical messages (not just ads, although ads are usually what spammers post) to a lot of newsgroups, one right after the other. Since it's really not that difficult to write a program that will post the same advertisement to dozens, if not hundreds or thousands of newsgroups, a lot of people have taken to doing this.

What's Happened To People Who've Spammed?

They've lost their accounts, been mail-bombed (had thousands of pieces of junk email sent to them), had people call up and yell at them in the middle of the night, had people forward their mail (by this I mean paper mail, not email) to someplace strange, had people sign them up for thousands of unwanted magazine subscriptions, had people send them thousands of pages of condemnatory faxes, and so forth.

Nothing is as hated on Usenet as spamming. It's extremely, unbelievably rude and if you do it, you *will* come to regret it.

This is not a threat—it's an observation. Any benefits spamming might have brought you will be more than counteracted by the intense public outcry against you in every newsgroup you posted your ad to.

Some members of the media have gotten the mistaken impression that spamming is hated because it's *advertising*. While it's true that Usenet users don't have much fondness for advertising, the real reason spamming is hated so much is because it's unbelievably *rude*.

If you don't regularly read a newsgroup, why would you post an ad to it? In so doing, you're basically saying that you don't care what the people in that newsgroup think or whether your ad might inconvenience them; you're out to benefit yourself. When you spam by posting the same advertisement to hundreds or thousands of newsgroups, you're saying that your personal profit is more important than the discussions of millions of people.

Would *you* like it if someone came by your house day after day and shoveled several thousand copies of an advertising circular through your windows?

Each copy of the ad takes up disk space on thousands of machines around the world—and if you post the ad 1,000 times, that's millions of copies of your message that *you* are making other people pay to store copies of. When you spam, you're hogging hundreds of thousands of dollars worth of other people's storage space.

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So please, don't do it. I've already explained that *one* copy of an off-topic ad is rude because it has nothing to do with the group it was posted to. Multiply that by a thousand times to get an idea of how rude it is to spam.

A Quick Note About What Happens To Spam

Another consideration against spamming is that Usenet readers developed defenses against it, so it's not very effective. There are quite a few spam detectors running on Usenet, and if one of them detects that the same message has been posted repeatedly to multiple newsgroups, the humans who run those spam detectors will step in and actually *erase* the spamming messages with "cancel" messages which are honored at most sites around the world.

A common misconception shared by many members of the media is that spam is bad because it's *advertising* and that people who cancel spam are doing so to get rid of *advertising*. In actual point of fact, most Usenet users consider cancellation to be extremely bad manners and something to be done only as a last resort. When spam-cancellers cancel spam, it's done because of the *volume* (posting hundreds of times), not because of the content.

The analogy that's often used is that yes, you have the right to walk down the street and say whatever you like—but you do *not* have the right to stick your head in someone's house at 3:00 A.M. and shout through a bullhorn.

So if you *do* spam, you're likely to lose your account, have your personal life made a living hell, possibly get sued by people whose storage space you're taking up, and in the end, not very many people are even going to see your advertisement. It's just not worth the grief you'll get.

Sorry to be unpleasant about it, but spam's a really bad idea.

Finally, if you're wondering where the term "spamming" came from, it came from a Monty Python sketch in which the characters were in a restaurant that mainly sold Spam. Items on the menu included things like "Spam, Spam, Spam, eggs, ham, and Spam." Whenever the waitress recited the menu, a group of Vikings in the corner would chime in with her, chanting the word "Spam" over and over, drowning out everything else.

Some members of the media have spread the explanation that the word “spamming” derives from throwing chunks of Spam into a fan. This is not where the term comes from.

UNSOLICITED JUNK EMAIL

Another often-practiced and often-punished scheme is to send email to thousands of strangers whose addresses you found in various Usenet newsgroups. In the last year, dozens of people have lost their Internet access after sending thousands of strangers ads for timeshare condos in Cancun or dubious credit schemes, and yet, the junk email continues to flood in.

Suffice it to say that junk email, using Usenet posters’ addresses, is a really bad idea. Most sites will yank your account if you do that kind of thing.

“MAIL-MERGED” ADS

Some advertisers noticed that it was only *identical* postings that were getting cancelled by the spam cancellers, and cleverly came up with a way to post their ad to dozens of newsgroups while varying a line or two to make it look sufficiently different to avoid being cancelled.

For example, one book editor posted ads to dozens of newsgroups about his book, essentially giving a sales pitch for said book, while adding a paragraph to each article that purported to contain the text that had been printed about each newsgroup in said book.

It was rather obvious that the editor wasn’t interested in getting feedback on the text since the book had already been published; eventually an employee at the company admitted that the technique had been used to try to avoid triggering the spam cancellers—and that the point had indeed been to broadcast the ad widely without getting cancelled.

Don’t do postings that say things like “Congratulations, REC.FOOD.DRINK.BEER reader, you are among the lucky few to be included in this amazing offer.” Spam that makes a token effort to relate to each newsgroup it’s posted to is still spam, and will still be erased on sight.

Conclusion

To make a long story short, off-topic advertising and advertising that equates to a bullhorn stuck into someone's window in the middle of the night are bad ideas.

Please exercise restraint and don't make the mistake many have of thinking that just because there's no central authority that can punish you for spamming newsgroups, there will be no consequences if you do.

There will be consequences if you spam—and you might be surprised by the lengths that vengeful Usenet users can go to when someone spams their favorite group with yet another off-topic advertisement.

If you want to advertise on Usenet, you can, but please follow the tips contained in this document's "How to" section and don't make the mistakes listed in "How not to do it."

Stay on topic; keep your notices hype-free; only post your notices to newsgroups where they are appropriate.

Do unto others as you would have them do unto you.

Afterword: Advertising On The Internet

It should be noted that there are many ways to advertise on the Internet that don't involve Usenet at all. Usenet, you see, is *not* the same thing as the Internet. Usenet is transmitted via the Internet, but is also transmitted via other means (see "What is Usenet" in **news.announce.newusers** for more information). The Internet also includes services like ftp, telnet, gopher, and the World Wide Web. A World Wide Web page allows you to put up graphics, text, and sound in an interactive hypertext format that's remarkably easy to set up and use. Many thousands of companies, individuals, and organizations have put up World Wide Web pages that can be viewed by anyone around the world with a Web browser such as Mosaic or Netscape.

Since the only people who see a Web page are people who *choose* to see it, and since the person who pays for the storage space necessary to hold the Web page is the

person or business or organization who put it up and designed it, a Web page is a *much* better way than advertising on Usenet to put your company's information up on the Internet.

If you need help getting going, ask the people who run your site for help on getting started; usually, all you really need to do is go buy a book on basic HTML (Hyper-Text Markup Language) design and/or scout out the newsgroup comp.infosystems.www.authoring.html. It's really not that hard to set up a Web page, and it's much, much, much more neighborly to put your advertising message on a Web page than to barrage the readers of Usenet.

If You Have Further Questions

A board of experienced Usenet users stands ready to help suggest nondestructive ways to use Usenet for your commercial purposes. Send mail to commerce@acpub.duke.edu if you have questions or would like help.

This FAQ can also be found online at www.danger.com/advo.html.