

## Spam gets even more personal

Written by Administrator

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[SMS](http://mobile88.com/news/read.asp?file=/2007/3/1/20070301032935&sec=coverstory#) is largely a boon. But the service is being abused by scam artists and even legitimate businesses are using it as a marketing tool causing some users to scream 'spam.' We take a look at the situation.

But these days, it isn't only used by regular consumers but also by companies looking to peddle their products and is recognised as a new vehicle for their marketing and promotions activities.

And why not? Instead of paying several thousand ringgit for traditional advertisements, companies only spend half that amount to employ a gateway company to spread their messages.


<div class="caption">BE WARY: Regulators, telcos and gateway companies advise people to be cautious when giving out their phone numbers to avoid being spammed.</div>

A simple beep makes the recipient check for messages immediately and it is this behaviour that has companies adopting it as a new marketing medium.

"It has proven to be a successful marketing and communications tool," said Kenny Goh, chief executive officer (CEO) of Macroiosk Bhd, a local gateway company.

But this system also has its drawbacks. Rather than appreciate that these companies are trying to promote their wares, many recipients consider these messages as spam.

SMS spam differs from e-mail spam because, with e-mail, users usually don't check their messages as frequently as they do their phones.

Also, to ease the frustration of receiving spam, most e-mail service providers have spam

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filters

that leave users with the messages they want to read. ♦

According to Goh, SMS has been around for some time but only became widely available as a service for consumers in 2000. ♦

He said it was initially used by the telcos to remind

[mobile](http://mobile88.com/news/read.asp?file=/2007/3/1/20070301032935&sec=coverstory#)

[phone](http://mobile88.com/news/read.asp?file=/2007/3/1/20070301032935&sec=coverstory#)

[users](http://mobile88.com/news/read.asp?file=/2007/3/1/20070301032935&sec=coverstory#)

about their bills. ♦

Today, apart from regular consumers using it to communicate personal messages, [retail](http://mobile88.com/news/read.asp?file=/2007/3/1/20070301032935&sec=coverstory#)

[outlets](http://mobile88.com/news/read.asp?file=/2007/3/1/20070301032935&sec=coverstory#)

and even neighbourhood associations are using it actively. ♦

The USJ residents' association, for example, updates members on incidents or activities in their neighbourhood while apparel retailer Padini informs customers on its latest promotions. ♦

However, as Goh puts it, one man's information can be another man's spam. ♦

Goh said that 95% of the time, what many see as spam is actually information that the recipient had agreed to receive previously. ♦

"Most of the time though, this information is useless and consumers label it as spam," he said. ♦

**Telcos to blame?** ♦

Some users complain that the telcos are part of the problem and are to be blamed. ♦

Azri Abd Samad, 32, said the telcos are to blame for customers grievances because most of the information they send are linked to their service and promotions. ♦

"It really clutters up your inbox," said the helpdesk consultant. ♦

Pamela Abideen gets annoyed with spam the telcos send especially when they are sent at the wrong times. ♦

"I'm a bit put off by it especially when I'm expecting an SMS from someone important," said the 52-year-old [customer](http://mobile88.com/news/read.asp?file=/2007/3/1/20070301032935&sec=coverstory#)

[service](http://mobile88.com/news/read.asp?file=/2007/3/1/20070301032935&sec=coverstory#)

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manager. ♦ </p><p align="justify">In their defence, the telcos say they do not bother subscribers with their promotions all the time. ♦ </p><p align="justify">Maxis Communications Bhd, for example, will not send more than three SMSes to its subscribers in a week said a company spokesman. ♦ </p><p align="justify">Another telco, DiGi Telecommunications Sdn Bhd would look at a package or service its subscribers have signed up for and only send out messages that the company feels are relevant to the user, said its head of value added services Noelle Tan. ♦ </p><p align="justify">Even gateway companies like Macroiosk, Goh said, would advise its clients not to send too many messages at once. ♦ </p><p align="justify">When this mountain of messages appear in the system, he said, it will be blocked and the client will be called to verify the situation. ♦ </p><p align="justify"><strong>Small print</strong>♦ </p><p align="justify">If SMS spam is bad, SMS scams that strip consumers of their hard earned money is worse. ♦ </p><p align="justify">Not long ago, SMS scammers used to lure their victims into using their services with attractive advertisements. ♦ </p><p align="justify">These ads usually came with the service's terms and conditions written in <a href="http://mobile88.com/news/read.asp?file=/2007/3/1/20070301032935&sec=coverstory#" target="\_top" onclick="adlinkMouseClick(event,this,9);"><font style="font-weight: 400; font-size: 11px; color: blue ! important; font-family: Verdana,Arial,Helvetica,sans-serif; position: static" color="#0000ff"><span style="font-weight: 400; font-size: 11px; color: blue ! important; font-family: Verdana,Arial,Helvetica,sans-serif; position: relative" class="kLink">small </span><span style="font-weight: 400; font-size: 11px; color: blue ! important; font-family: Verdana,Arial,Helvetica,sans-serif; position: relative" class="kLink">print</span></font></a> and was usually overlooked by the victims. ♦ </p><p align="justify">Unknown to the customers, they are automatically added to a list of users and are sent spam messages, often up to 10 times a day and each time they receive an announcement, about RM1 is deducted from their prepaid airtime credit. ♦ </p><p align="justify">Usually, these deductions go unnoticed because subscribers are not immediately notified of their latest <a href="http://mobile88.com/news/read.asp?file=/2007/3/1/20070301032935&sec=coverstory#" target="\_top" onclick="adlinkMouseClick(event,this,10);"><font style="font-weight: 400; font-size: 11px; color: blue ! important; font-family: Verdana,Arial,Helvetica,sans-serif; position: static" color="#0000ff"><span style="font-weight: 400; font-size: 11px; color: blue ! important; font-family: Verdana,Arial,Helvetica,sans-serif; position: relative" class="kLink">credit </span><span style="font-weight: 400; font-size: 11px; color: blue ! important; font-family: Verdana,Arial,Helvetica,sans-serif; position: relative" class="kLink">balance</span></font></a>. ♦ </p><p align="justify">It's only when they try to make a call do they realise that their airtime credit has decreased. ♦ </p><p align="justify">In these cases, the scammer cannot be held responsible for cheating because as far as they are concerned, the terms and conditions for such services have been clearly stated. ♦ </p><p align="justify">Darshan Singh, National Consumers Complaint Centre (NCCC) chairman, said that there is still a significant number of people who fall for these scams. ♦ </p><p align="justify">"Last year, we received about 1,700 complaints," he said. ♦ </p><p align="justify">There is also a host of other SMS hoaxes going around but one of the more popular ones is the recent scam <a href="http://mobile88.com/news/read.asp?file=/2007/3/1/20070301032935&sec=coverstory#" target="\_top" onclick="adlinkMouseClick(event,this,11);"><font style="font-weight: 400; font-size: 11px; color: blue ! important; font-family: Verdana,Arial,Helvetica,sans-serif; position: static" color="#0000ff"><span style="font-weight: 400; font-size: 11px; color: blue ! important;

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class="kLink">riding</span></font></a> on the popularity of local reality show Akademi Fantasia. ♦ </p><p align="justify">In this scam, recipients are told that they have won a considerable amount of money. ♦ </p><p align="justify">Winners will then be asked to deposit RM1,000 as a processing fee for their winnings. ♦ </p><p align="justify">According to news reports, by the end of last year, 10 people in Penang lost some RM15,000 to the scam. ♦ </p><p align="justify">Goh does not deny that there are unscrupulous parties using these methods to make a quick buck. ♦ </p><p align="justify">"Unfortunately, there are some black sheep in this industry so we warn our clients about sending such messages," he said. ♦ </p><p align="justify"><strong>Guidelines laid</strong>♦ </p><p align="justify">According to Darshan, the Malaysian Communications and Multimedia Commission (MCMC) had set up guidelines to govern these SMS businesses. ♦ </p><p align="justify">Unfortunately, he said, these guidelines are not enough to keep these companies from using spam to make a profit. ♦ </p><p align="justify">Two guidelines are drawn up but he found that these SMS scammers managed to find loopholes. ♦ </p><p align="justify">The first guideline, issued in August 2005, banned the "auto-member" policy used by many of these companies. ♦ </p><p align="justify">Content providers from then on also had to state the prices of the SMS sent before continuing with the service. ♦ </p><p align="justify">Content providers also had to include an "opt-out" option for subscribers to cancel their subscription. ♦ </p><p align="justify">Since the auto-member method was disallowed, scammers changed their subscriptions to monthly terms to trap users for longer periods while tricking them into thinking the messages were merely promotional and free. ♦ </p><p align="justify">Darshan said the MCMC tightened the guideline last July which included dividing content into two categories ♦ content- and time-based subscription. ♦ </p><p align="justify">Content-based subscriptions such as news or horoscopes had to include a subscription reminder with the message and users are charged for the amount of content they request. ♦ </p><p align="justify">Time-based subscriptions, on the other hand, introduce a fixed charge for the subscription period. ♦ </p><p align="justify">Though this guideline is supposed to be better than the first one, Darshan said it all boils down to the attitude of the content provider. ♦ </p><p align="justify">"If a content provider is adamant on not following, they will interpret the guidelines as they see fit," Darshan said. ♦ </p><p align="justify">This is why, he said, the complaints against these content providers continue to pour in. ♦ </p><p align="justify"><strong>Be smart</strong>♦ </p><p align="justify">One tends to wonder where these spammers and scammers might have obtained their victims' phone numbers. ♦ </p><p align="justify">Telcos, gateway companies and the MCMC all agree that recipients must have left their numbers with a retail outlet or restaurant. ♦ </p><p align="justify">Goh even adds that these numbers could have been bought from data mining companies. ♦ </p><p align="justify">"That is why sometimes we may get a hoax from a foreign number," he said. ♦ </p><p align="justify">The advice from the NCCC, MCMC and the telcos however is a simple one. Do not be so gullible. ♦ </p><p align="justify">"If you're so gullible to fall for something like that, then even we won't have pity for you," Darshan exclaimed. ♦ </p><p align="justify">The most the NCCC can do, Darshan said, is to pressure the telcos and MCMC to block such numbers from broadcasting their messages in the country. ♦ </p><p align="justify">DiGi's Tan, said people should be cautious at all times. ♦ </p><p align="justify">"You should be aware where you leave your numbers and with whom you share it," she said. ♦ </p><p align="justify">A Maxis spokesman advised subscribers to check with their service provider if they receive suspicious SMS messages.♦

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**Dealing with SMS spam** ♦

Like e-mail spam, SMS spam can be managed. ♦

Local gateway company Macroiosk Bhd's CEO Kenny Goh said his company's automated system filters messages and checks if they adhere to the mass messaging guideline. ♦

"We make sure it includes the "Opt-Out" option if it doesn't, then the system will block it," he said. ♦

The system also looks out for messages containing obscenities or is composed like a hoax and blocks them. ♦

Goh said gateway companies also conduct research on the client and draw up a commercial agreement before proceeding to send messages. ♦

"We want to know what our client is selling, who they are targeting and how many messages they are sending. ♦

"If they break such agreements, then we can terminate them or take legal action against them," he said. ♦

Darshan Singh, chairman of the National Consumers Complaint Centre (NCCC) said the organisation will continue to negotiate with the MCMC and try to get telcos to block shortcodes that send hoaxes or find other ways of cheating consumers. ♦

"We've sent our suggestions to protect consumers from unscrupulous parties to the MCMC," he said. ♦

This, according to him, includes getting MCMC to issue a directive for all telcos to offer a way for consumers to check their prepaid airtime credit. ♦

He said this will help them better keep track of their credit balance after they have requested for content from providers. ♦

He said "So far, I know of only one that does it but what about the other two?" ♦

Darshan is also calling for MCMC to verify all SMS business models before issuing a shortcode. ♦

"We found out that nobody controls this and the content providers can easily obtain a shortcode for their businesses," he said. ♦

The MCMC is the final body to turn to if you've been bothered by telecommunications woes. ♦

Last year, the regulatory body for the communications industry received a total of 145 complaints on SMS spam. ♦

MCMC's head of corporate and community Infocomm, Adelina Iskandar said that to avoid the problem "You can start with not leaving your phone number with just anyone." ♦

If this isn't enough, subscribers can also request for service providers to block any spam that is targeted at you. ♦

"You can also tell the content providers to stop spamming you by typing OUT and sending it to the shortcode it came from," she said. ♦

She adds if all efforts have proven futile, then subscribers can bring the matter up with MCMC. ♦

"If the matter is unresolved, MCMC will step in," Adelina said. ♦