

# Your message contains offensive text...

**Y**our message to xxxxxxx@xyz.com.au contains offensive text and has been quarantined.' The next response to my e-mail broadcast from another source confirmed my worst fears: 'This e-mail contains words that are against the Acceptable Usage Policy of XYZ Pty Ltd and has been rejected. Please edit and resend.'



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I could hardly believe what I was reading. The level of paranoia had increased to such a level that an e-mail that I was trying to send informing recipients of events of the past few weeks was being bounced back to me, with the full force of automated software that detects and deletes 'nasty' content.

What surprised me in the follow-up to these messages was the level of support that I received from frustrated staff at a number of these sites who all complained of difficulties in dealing with their information technology managers (who obviously take a different view of communication). Considering that a good deal of attention is being placed on the use of e-mail in the workplace lately, it is hardly surprising that harried system administrators are having to resort to clumsy software to ensure the 'cleanliness' of their site. But the solutions that they are deploying are at times farcical, and at best, limited, in what they can achieve. It is a shame that many e-mail users have no option but to rely on these clumsy workarounds. In those workplaces that have deployed filtering software without informing staff, I suggest a quick read of Phil Teece's column in last month's *inCite*.

Software that purports to check for keywords and blocks transmission of messages containing 'illegal' words are now routinely found in some larger workplaces. The results can be hilarious, though saddening. Many years ago (even in internet terms), I reported that our then executive director had difficulties in using some search engines or was unable to find her own webpages because part of her name contained the word 'virgin'. Little has changed today. I pity those with a surname of 'Love' at this moment in time — no doubt countless e-mails to and from these hapless individuals are being denied passage due to being on the current 'hit list' of prohibited content.

Automated software that replies to inform the sender that the content of an e-mail is against an 'Acceptable Usage Policy' (but with no mention of what that policy might actually be) smacks of filtering gone berserk. We rely so much on e-mail these days that it is bizarre that so little effort is put into developing effective solutions to the problem of offensive text — if, indeed, it really is a problem (ignoring the obvious deficiencies of the Microsoft Windows operating system that allows a small amount of simple programming to do so much harm).

## Making e-mail effective

I was asked recently how best to use e-mail and other internet services to communicate with a wide range of recipients and to elicit a positive response. There are many ways of doing this without shooting oneself in the proverbial foot, and yet there are still people new to the internet who need guidance. Electronic discussion lists (such as found on ALIANet) can be a perfect medium for communicating with a well-targeted audience, but only when used in moderation. Sending the same message to a large number of lists, or sending an e-mail that contains a Word document (or any other attachment, virus-free or not) is considered not only a faux pas in internet terms, but also risks damaging the reputation of the sender and any business that may or may not be associated with that person.

List and e-mail etiquette has barely changed in all of the time that e-lists have been in existence, and the information found on ALIANet (<http://www.alia.org.au/e-lists/netiquette.html>) is a good reference starting point.

Almost all e-lists have a specific objective — to facilitate a forum for the exchange of ideas on a particular range of issues. The guidelines for each list can vary, but essentially they follow these general rules:

1. Discussion will focus on the outlined objectives/topics of the e-list.
2. Discussion unrelated to these topics is inappropriate.
3. Posting the same message to multiple mailing lists is discouraged.
4. Postings that include libelous or defamatory material, inappropriate language, or a general lack of respect for others are unacceptable.
5. Blatant product or service marketing is unacceptable.
6. Be concise, or else — better to provide a URL or to offer to send the full text to individual requests.

Following these basic guidelines (and on any given list-server, there are almost always more specific operational rules — <http://www.alia.org.au/e-lists/rules.html> — that must be observed in conjunction with any guidelines) will ensure that your postings will be received favourably. For good measure, if you are not certain of the appropriateness of any given message to an e-list, consult with the list owner(s) first.

And to my Mum, who may be reading this and wondering what I wrote in that e-mail that was possibly so offensive to incur the wrath of so many, I have yet to receive a reply that indicates what words were deemed inappropriate. ■

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