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Who Sent That Sex-Toy E-mail? Your Friendly Chinese Spamufacturer

By Robert McMillan  January 25, 2012 | 6:30 am | Categories: [Security](#), [Software](#)

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IMPORTANT NOTE
All our sex toys are CE and RoHS certified.

Business Principle
Cheap price, highest quality, on time delivery, hospitality, responsible for each customer!

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We accept all major payment types including credit card, PayPal, Western Union and bank transfer.

   





Small businesses in China are reaching out to customers in the U.S., using spam.

A few days after Christmas last month, Dr. Hai Hong of Shenzhen, China started spamming U.S. e-mail inboxes with ads for his company's latest products. Hong, who has been in the manufacturing business since 2006, drew special attention to his company's latest products: the Butt Plug, Rainbow Cock Ring, and the intriguingly named OEM Remote Control Vibrating Egg 43-3, which can be activated from a distance of up to 20 meters.

Hong is one of a new generation of Chinese entrepreneurs: manufacturers who are trying to bust out of the local markets — where profit margins are razor-thin — and capture more lucrative U.S. and European customers.

Hong sells sex toys, but you can get just about anything from these guys. Need a few thousand iPad cases? They've got your back. GPS trackers for your fleet of trucks? No problem. How about a few tons

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of ferromanganese? They've got that too.

They say that they're legitimate businesses. They just happen to be spammers too.

Spam experts say that relative to the billions and billions of messages they block each day, these spammanufacturers make up just a drop in the spam bucket.

But because they don't fit into any easy-to-spot patterns, the messages are surprisingly good at evading detection. They're generally targeted e-mails, written by hand, not copied templates, and they often come directly from a small Chinese company — from mail servers that haven't yet been flagged as abusive by the antispam watchers. "When we look at these, we'll see typos in HTML tags — like a person is coding their own HTML," says Chester Wisniewski, a senior security advisor with Sophos, a computer security company that sells anti-spam software. "That makes it really hard for the antispam companies to figure out what the pattern is because there is no pattern."

Dr. Hai Hong's story is a typical tale in China's hyper-competitive manufacturing sector. A medical-school graduate, Hong turned to manufacturing in 2005, after he failed to line up a hospital job. He started building plastic moldings for manufacturers, but it was a tough business, and Hong and his business partner saw that they could improve margins by going direct. They tried selling on Alibaba.com — a popular Chinese marketplace for small businesses — but it was still tough to make a profit, and they knew that if they could somehow sell directly to the bondage and S&M websites that marketed these products to U.S. and European customers, they'd make a lot more money.

That's how Loveflowerbud.com came into existence. Hong set up the website to give his 60-person factory a global presence, but soon after he went into business, he was bombarded by calls from software companies offering to sell him software to help boost his website's ranking in search results and to reach potential U.S. customers via e-mail.

Hong, like other spammanufacturers contacted for this article, wouldn't name the software he ended up using for his sex-toy marketing, but he said that it costs him "around \$1,000 each year."

Here's how it works: "I type 'sex toy' in the software and the software will automatically check Google and give you a list of companies who are doing business in the sex-toy industry," Hong tells us. "If you click 'send e-mail,' it can send e-mails to these companies."

Other spammanufacturers describe similar techniques. "We Google customers and send sales mail to U.S. customers," says Helen Shen, a representative with ZhengLin Wooden & Bamboo Craft, a maker of bamboo iPhone and iPad cases.

These companies are not trying to spam everyone on the internet. They're looking to do business using unsolicited commercial e-mail messages, and they use techniques that run afoul of U.S. law: The bulk messages are sent to potential customers who have not given prior consent, and they rarely offer recipients a way to unsubscribe from future mailings.

And they often use software that really isn't very good.

When we ask Hong how his sex-toy e-mail ended up in our Wired.com mailbox, he says: "Oh. You were reached by mistake, I think ...". And then he proceeded to describe a second program he uses. This one scours the internet looking for even more addresses. At first, he was happy to get so many e-mail addresses, but he doesn't use this program anymore. "It has got me many e-mails, but the e-mails are not my customer, so I send them but they make no value."

In fact, Hong doesn't see himself as a spammer. "I only contact companies in this industry. You are reached by mistake," he tells us. "I am not sending spam e-mails. I am making an e-mail marketing."

But he's certainly not alone. Many Chinese small businesses are continuously bombarded by offers to use this type of software, according to George Haley, professor of marketing and international business at the University of New Haven's College of Business. "Most of the companies sending out these e-mails are perfectly legitimate, and most of the software designers that design them are perfectly legitimate software designers," he says.



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According to Haley, the real problems start when inexperienced Chinese companies start doing international business — and dealing with China's byzantine export regulations — for the first time. That can mean losses for the small business, or late shipments to the U.S. customer. In a worst-case scenario, the Chinese manufacturer could even face jail time for an export code infraction. "In dealing with China Customs small companies without established relationships with the customs officers in their home region are at a serious disadvantage," he says.

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Robert McMillan is a writer with Wired Enterprise. Got a tip? Send him an email at: robert_mcmillan [at] wired.com. Follow @bobmcmillan on Twitter.

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Dennis

Back in the old days before email was ubiquitous, my boss wanted me to set up auto-faxing of our ads to businesses in the area that were potential clients. They sold these CD's with tons of fax and phone numbers on them and we'd use that. We'd usually run them overnight. We had so many problems with it. Lot's of wrong numbers. Some receiver's fax machines would print the received pages over and over again until they ran out of paper. People would fax the ads back with angry words on it. It would keep redialing some poor person's home number that used to be a fax. It was the pre-cursor to SPAM and I'm sure I'll have to spend a little bit of time on one of the circles of Hell to pay for my sins.

1 day ago 8 Likes

Like Reply

madlyb

Yep, and the only reason the USPS is still in business is companies sending out tons of Junk Mail. The web didn't invent this mess, it just lowered the barrier for use to basically zero, so it became a Trillion times worse.

And has been said before, if it didn't work, they wouldn't do it. If Hong gets just one serious order from a retailer, he will recoup his investment.

1 day ago in reply to Dennis 2 Likes

Like Reply



alexandrek

At least, email are not a huge waist, the amount of useless printed paper, carton, plastic we trash every year is pathetic!

12 hours ago in reply to madlyb

Like Reply



CommonSense033

Got a mail server? Block all messages from Nigeria, China and Eastern Europe. Your spam levels will fall off the chart.

1 day ago 1 Like

Like Reply



Neeneko

Never tried to set up a server based spam filter, have you?

1 day ago in reply to CommonSense033 1 Like

Like Reply



Scott

Block america and it will be non extant

1 day ago in reply to CommonSense033

Like Reply



DaveBliss

Kind of interesting how one mans spam is anothers advertising...But really, these people are the entrepreneurs that Americans used to be. Soon they too will be driven into the ground by government regulation...

1 day ago 1 Like

Like Reply



Neeneko

Well, that is what spam is...

And yeah.. if you look at conditions over in China, I think being 'driven into the ground by regulation' is exactly what they need. People tend to forget what a shithole a lot of America was before regulation.. the remember the opulence of the robber barrons and fancy themselves the next mogul.. and tend to forget the abject poverty and lack of social mobility people had. It took regulation to level the playing field enough for American entrepreneurs to really shine.

1 day ago in reply to DaveBliss 9 Likes

Like Reply



Robert

Yes. It's very competitive out here. It's no wonder that he's using EVERY MEANS that he has to keep his factories running without having to lay people off. This is something that you would never see in the USA.

8 hours ago

Like Reply



NeilJones2012

with bandwidth becoming so cheap and plentiful spam is not really the big deal it once was.

10 hours ago

Like Reply



USArules

Sorry, but I don't want to have sex with something that will give me lead poisoning.

19 hours ago

Like Reply



Michael S

Hmm... his spamming argument reminds me of "I am proud, you are boastful, he is a braggard."

1 day ago

Like Reply



ZongMeee

This comment was flagged for review.

1 day ago

Like Reply



Alfred P. Reaud, [(to_be) || !(to_be)]; # that is the question...

Except, Bill, that your company is in the US and servers are probably in the US. Therefore I would be suspicious that the ability to actually remain anonymous is highly unlikely using your servers because of the Patriot Act as applied to ISPs in the US.

Rather than recommending Cyber Solutions, I would recommend you just download the latest Tor Bundle and try it. That free, and open source, LOL. What does Cyber Solutions provide, Bill?

1 day ago in reply to ZongMeee 2 Likes

Like Reply



Scott

ummmmmm how the hell does tor protect u from spam

1 day ago in reply to Alfred P. Reaud

Like Reply



Alfred P. Reaud, [(to_be) || !(to_be)]; # that is the question...

You use it to create an anonymous email address that isn't focused on Comcast, Quest, or other ISP. Spammers don't bother what looks like a spam mail address, LOL!

That reply was more focused on "ZongMeee's" spam above, not on the actual content of this thread.

1 day ago in reply to Scott

Like Reply



Scott

anonymous email will soon get spam
tor don't protect (Read about it. It's easy for some people to hack it)
and yes this about email spam and not about the thought's of some noitall that figured out how to beat it

23 hours ago in reply to Alfred P. Reaud 2 Likes

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