

It's About Time

Today I happened to talk to an old college buddy who called me from his cell. "Where are you going," I asked.

"You mean you don't you know? The Todd concert! Didn't you get my e-mails?"

Well, actually, I probably did. In fact, I get e-mails from this particular buddy (let's call him Mark) at least once a day. He continually forwards me jokes, inspirational stories, internet rumors and outright hoaxes. You know the type, you spent the nineties trying to convince him to "get connected," and now you regret it.

I've learned to just ignore messages from my good ol' buddy. I don't have the time to read them all. Don't get me wrong, I really wish I would have opened the message he sent about the Todd Rundgren Concert in Cleveland Ohio. I would have had a great time riding out to Cleveland with him to use the other free ticket he won on some internet site.

But I didn't. I simply ignore the messages I receive from Mark.

I used to try to filter through his e-mails. Then I found myself spending a good chunk of my "e-mail-processing-time" answering questions about internet rumors. I became a regular at snopes.com

So I started moving his messages to a folder named "read_later." I honestly had the good intention that somewhere down the road, in that fantasy place called "when-I-have-the-time," I'd get to sort through the messages looking for that diamond in the rough called "meaningful information."

But I never made it to that fantasy land.

In fact, given that I help banks conduct risk assessments on a regular basis, I think a lot about the likelihood of events occurring. Let me tell you, the likelihood of me ever making it to "when-I-have-the-time-land" is far less than the likelihood of me making it to never-never-land, and I long ago gave up hope of making it to that place.

So, I just started deleting Mark's messages as they came in. I know, it comes off like I'm not a very good friend. I tried talking to Mark about it, but he couldn't figure out how to take me off his mailing lists and since I never use AOL, I couldn't help him. (I did a bit of research and sent him a couple of links on the subject, but I suspect he didn't want to waste any of HIS time investigating my links.)

The result: I missed the Todd Rundgren concert. At the House of Blues. In Cleveland. "Oh man," I whined into the phone, "he'll probably do some of his old blues songs." From before my time. The best of Todd.

Yes, I'm bummed about that. I've been a Todd fan since I was 17 years old. I own most of his albums before they stopped making vinyl, and definitely have all of his CDs. I own three Nazz CDs, the Psychedelic Furs CD, and I even own the Meatloaf CD because Todd produced it. And Todd's blues wow . . .

I am definitely the type of person who would have LOVED the great seats my friend Mark told me he procured by registering for free tickets on some obscure internet site.

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By the way, my friend Mark has virus problems on a regular basis. And I'm sure the site that gave away the tickets account for a good chunk of the current spam in his quarantine.

"Just stick to stuff you know I'd be interested in," said I. "Believe me, I have a lot of friends that forward me stuff. But it is MEANINGFUL information, not internet rumors or jokes or stories about somebody's kitty."

Mark has acquired "tenure" where he works, something that always amazes me. Because of that, he has what must be hours of time to search internet sites for dumb e-mail fodder. I tried to talk to him, as I encourage bankers to do with their friends.

"Mark, can you just forward me messages about information security or something that really pertains to my life?"

I won't say where Mark works, because even though I've changed his name here, I fear that my other college buddies will read this article and know who I am talking about. Not that they would mind, they probably receive way too much e-mail from Mark too.

"Mark, if you can keep the messages to a few, I can guarantee you I'll read them."

And just so you know, my friend Mark is one of those college buddies who knows he's obnoxious and rude, but believes he has a pass on this because, after all, he's a college buddy. In fact, I told him I'm going to write this article about him as soon as I hang up. And I'm sure he'll go out to our portal and read this one, since it's about him.

"Mark, the joke you sent is not only bad, but it also tripped off all kinds of alerts in our intrusion detection system."

We all have buddies like Mark, don't we?

What I preach in my security awareness training is this: Ignore Mark. The bank policy is: Ignore Mark. The best practice is: Ignore Mark. The safe practice is: Ignore Mark. When in doubt, IGNORE MARK!!!

Oh yes, like most of you . . . people interested enough in "how-do-we-stop-forwarding-of-e-mails" to be still reading this article . . . I get all kinds of questions like: "but what if the e-mail has genuine information?"

Or: "but isn't Mark going to think I'm rude?"

I happen to think Mark's rude. I've told him dozens of time that unlike him, I use e-mail for communication. There's no such thing as tenure in a for-profit business.

Like you, I have run into too many people genuinely concerned that if they ignore these messages, they will somehow be out of the loop.

"What if it's really true?"

"What if the information in it is timely?"

“What if you really can cook an egg by placing it between two cell phones?”

As I said above, when we do security awareness training for banks, we strongly encourage employees to ignore these internet rumors. At any given time, there are hundreds of stories like this floating around the internet. If any of them have any truth to them, you will be able to read about it in one of the local newspapers.

We see these types of messages as a security issue in two ways:

#1) Many of them convince readers to take actions which can lead to Trojan horses, deleted files, more spam (due to e-mails in the forwards), disseminated misinformation, etc.

#2) The time it takes to hunt down the truth of the matter could be spent increasing your productivity.

Meanwhile, let's not forget, it is journalists, not bankers, who are paid to chase rumors to see if they are true.

What we say in security awareness training: Let professional journalism get to the truth. Rely on the newspaper for news. Go back to work!

I usually bill for my time on an hourly rate. And as much as I like Todd Rundgren, the time it would take for me to handle Mark's forwards would easily pay for several tickets to “Toddstock” in Hawaii, which I had to skip because . . . well . . . I just don't have the time.

Which gets me to the point of this article: It's about time. Sure, forwarding e-mails makes our friends more susceptible to viruses (because they become used to launching attachments they are not expecting.) Sure, It also makes us more vulnerable to phishing and hoaxes.

But let's face it folks, the real cost of e-mail forwarding is TIME.

So am I sad I'm not on the road to Cleveland right now?

Yes.

But do I regret it?

Nope.

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Dan has worked extensively with banks on policy issues, engaging on projects ranging from gap analysis to developing a full policy set for denovo banks. He can tailor his consulting to any size bank, working on simple user-level policies with banks as small as one location to overseeing the entire IT strategy for a publicly held company. He has provided management-level regulatory compliance training for Fortune 500 companies as well as user-level awareness training for the smallest of banks. His strength is helping banks decide where in the "security/compliance spectrum" they should be. He has helped develop risk management programs and processes for banks as large as 2.5 billion and as small as 26 million in assets.

He is the Managing Partner of **infotex**, an Indiana Bankers Association Preferred Service Provider in several areas, including Information Security Training.