

There Ain't No Such Thing As A Free Lunch – Hotmail

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By Richard Lowe

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This column is about TANSTAAFL, which is a term from a book by Robert A. Heinlein (one of the best Science Fiction authors that ever lived) called "The Moon Is A Harsh Mistress". The term means "There Ain't No Such Thing As A Free Lunch". This concept is the basis of the plot of the book, which is about a Lunar penal colony and it's attempt to free itself from Earth domination.

Hotmail

Recently Microsoft instituted a new policy regarding their Hotmail service which annoyed a large number of customers. Like most free email services, Hotmail has been struggling with the recent failure of the advertising model. (Advertisers pay for services to show ads to people, who get the services for no cost). This failure means fewer advertisers are willing to pay, and those that do pay demand lower costs and higher returns.

Hotmail has taken the same tack as many other previously free services – they are attempting to remain free, but reduce the benefits of the free accounts in order to entice people to spend money for paid accounts.

Their new policy was simple and seemed straightforward to them. They simply decided to delete all emails in the SENT items folder that were older than thirty days. This seemed like a perfectly valid decision to them, so reasonable that they only sent one notice to their users.

Well, it was not reasonable at all.

I've run into similar boneheaded thinking before, of course. I manage the production computer department of a multi-billion dollar company. Our job is to ensure that all of the user workstations and the applications servers are up, running and doing useful things 24 hours a day, seven days a week.

One day one of my people (who should have known better) decided he needed to work on the workstation of the CFO (Chief Financial Officer). Disk space was low, so he emptied the trash can. Seems perfectly reasonable, doesn't it?

Well, as it turned out, the CFO was using the trash can to store documents. She never emptied it, and thought it was just another folder. So she stored hundreds of sub-folders and thousands of vital company documents there. She thought of it as a place to put documents that she no longer needed.

Now, just about any other user would have been told that this was not proper and that would have been the end of it. However, this was the CFO, a vice president in a multi-billion dollar company. We had to scramble to recover the documents, and only managed because I had made a backup of her system, including the recycle bin.

The Hotmail action was discussed on several forums recently. Below are some of the conclusions and my answers. You may find this interesting.

Why would Microsoft do such a terrible thing? – The point is Microsoft (and Yahoo and others as well) are trying to give an incentive for people to pay for their service. Thus, slowly removing features from the free service is the chosen way to do that.

Microsoft is evil! No other companies are doing this – Virtually all of the "free" email providers, web hosting companies and others are doing much the same thing. Most are far more brutal than Microsoft was in this case. Many free hosts simply deleted tens of thousands of web sites with very little notice ...

You cannot hang it on Microsoft. They sent an email and those who did not read it or ignored it deserve what they got – I can

hang it on Microsoft. One email is not enough. The post office is required to go through agonizing public hearings to make changes, why shouldn't email providers be required to do the same (regardless of their one-sided terms of service agreements that very people people would understand even if they took the time to read them).

Microsoft should not have done this. After all, MSN is subsidized by Windows XP, which costs an incredible amount of money – Windows XP and MSN are two separate divisions in Microsoft and have absolutely nothing to do with each other. Windows XP sales in no way go towards supporting MSN or vice versa.

Why would you trust a free service with your vital email? It's free, so you get what you pay for – We trust 3rd parties all of the time. We trust the post office to deliver our mail, the

water company to give us water, and MacDonald's to not poison us with their food. Why shouldn't we trust our email provider? If we find we cannot, it's time to find another one.

It's free! You should not expect anything from a free service – There is, however, a certain expectation that goes along with providing the free service. MSN is trying to build a name and they are touting themselves as safe, easy, comfortable. These actions don't help that perception at all.

And people are paying – the service is not by any means free, any more than network television is free. Users have to view advertisements in both email and on the web site, and those ads are paid for.

The charges are simply indirect.

This just proves you cannot trust Microsoft – it's not just Microsoft. Other large companies (Yahoo comes to mind right away) institute changes with little or no notice and no feelings for their users at all.

I find it interesting that companies can make changes like this at will – imagine if the post office decided to burn all of the mail that sat in PO boxes for more than a month?

It's up to us as consumers to leave services that act like this,

and to make the reasons why we leave known. It is not acceptable for companies to treat their users, who depend upon their services (regardless of the price), as commodities. Users and customers are people who deserve respect.

Individuals who leave cannot make an impact, so why bother – It does not matter what the impact is upon the company or corporation you are leaving. If the company does not provide decent service, free or not, and treats you (the customer) as a commodity instead of as a human being, then you should leave and find a company that is better suited. This is the way to change a corporation.

People should not use free services. Paid services would never do this to their customers – Unfortunately, pay email services make the same kind of decisions (or simply fold upon occasion). My experience is you just have to be prepared.

Companies such as Hotmail clearly state this kind of thing in their terms and conditions – The problem is that it has become normal and accepted for companies to be able to have a line in their terms and conditions stating "we can change these terms

at any time without notice". Imagine if that clause was in your home mortgage or car loan or whatever! The mortgage company could change the terms of the loan without notice, or could decide it wanted a parking lot on your property and you wouldn't know until the bulldozers showed up!

That's the thing that needs to be changed. Terms and conditions should not be modifiable from the second they are agreed to without permission (not notice, permission).

People should back up their email so it is not a disaster when this kind of thing happens – One of the real issues here is hotmail and msn are touting themselves as easy, comfortable, something even a child or a completely computer illiterate can use. Thus, the concept from MSN's advertising and promotional materials is you don't need to back up, you don't need to worry, and so on. Now, people "in the know" or who have experience know better. But I cannot blame someone for trusting ... shame on the corporation for uncaringly breaking that trust and treating the individuals as commodities, no more valuable than any other raw material.

What can we do? We are helpless to large corporations – Has anyone heard the words "class action lawsuit"?

On what grounds? – It's time to get corporate America's attention. Doesn't matter what the grounds are ... just the mere fact that a lawsuit has been filed by enough people can send shivers down the spines of any executive and force change. And I'm sure that any lawyer worth his 50% commission can think of any number of laws that may have been violated.

The point is we (individuals) need to tell corporations that we will not be treated as commodities. There are many ways to do this, and lawsuits are just one of them.

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A New Twist To The Signature File Idea

By Terence Tan

After the incredible success of Hotmail.com, the use of signature files on all outgoing e-mail accounts has been a common method of web promotion.

The limitation that most people face is that there is a limit to how much "legitimate" e-mail they can send everyday.

A key but often overlooked characteristic of the Hotmail campaign that made it wildly successful is that every user of Hotmail was actually part of its campaign. Rather than sending signature file ads from only one e-mail account, Hotmail had a virtual army of people promoting their service.

One way we can boost the number of mails carrying our signature files is to offer free e-mail accounts to people and attach OUR signature files to their outgoing email. While it is now harder to give out free e-mail accounts than when Hotmail first started out, even a small handful of active users of your free service can dramatically increase the number of your signature files being displayed.

Everyone.net offers a cheap Group Mail account that lets us offer free e-mail accounts to 100 people, at \$9.99 a month.

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For less than 10 cents each, you'll get an large group of people pushing your advertisement every time they send out an e-mail message.

There are probably other companies offering to let you provide free e-mail to others (the key point being they must allow you to attach YOUR signature file to each outgoing e-mail), but Everyone.net does seem to be very user friendly, easy to set-up(no setup cost), and cheapest.

They also offer to give you a free domain name of your choice when you sign up.

If you already own XYZ.com, you could take advantage of their offer by also getting XYZ.net for free.

For sites with large and dedicated North American audiences, there is even a Sponsored Mail solution where they essentially offer their service for FREE!

This is certainly a proven, low cost strategy to use, especially if you are looking for some "free stuff" to offer your web site visitors, gaining their goodwill and turning them into your "evangelists" at the same time.

Terence Tan is the founder of

, a website dedicated towards the development of

Multi Level Affiliate Programs as an alternative system of business. Visit

to

learn how MLAPs can multiply your affiliate referral commissions.

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Will Microsoft Kill Email on the Net?

How To Use Viral Marketing To Grow Your Opt In Email List

How Can You Can Go From Zero To Hero Overnight? Viral Marketing!

Some "Free Stuff" Still Survives Online

Guerrilla Mailer

Vegetarian Recipe Book

How to become a Chef!

Newbie's Guide to Stop Spam

Online Dating Secrets Revealed!



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