



Spam Filter Lets Citizens Be Heard In State of Wisconsin

State representative regains confidence in email

The Organization

The Wisconsin Legislative Branch consists of the bicameral Wisconsin Legislature, made up of the senate with 33 members and the assembly with 99 members, together with the service agencies created by the legislature and the staff employed by each house. The legislature's main responsibility is to make policy by enacting state laws. Its service agencies assist it by performing fiscal analysis, research, bill drafting, auditing, statute editing, and information technology functions.

The Challenge

State legislators, their staffs, and state agencies want to be responsive to the needs of their constituents. For them, it is critical not to ignore an email request. These messages can be about any topic, including complaints, and senders cannot be challenged. Yet public figures may be overwhelmed with spam because their names and email addresses are very public. They need a special kind of spam filter to eliminate spam but retain the important email.

Spencer Black, ten-term state representative for the 77th Assembly District of Wisconsin and ranking Democratic member of the Natural Resources and Administrative Rules Committees, values the opinions and feedback of his constituents.

"I represent 55,000 people, and the most important part of my job is to listen to them. Today many of my constituents use email to tell me what they think. Email makes it a lot easier to communicate with your elected representatives. To me, that's what a democracy is all about," Rep. Black commented.

A year ago, however, Rep. Black felt differently about email. "The problem was, I was getting so much spam, I was actually encouraging people not to email me, but to write me a letter instead," he recalled. This alternative created massive amounts of paper mail. And for a legislator with a strong record of protecting Wisconsin's natural environment, escalating paper usage was not the best solution.

Legislators' email addresses are public information, posted on the State of Wisconsin's web site and on individual legislators' home pages. They are also posted frequently in newspaper articles and directories. While this makes it easier for constituents to reach their representatives, unfortunately it also makes it easier for spammers to add their email addresses to their lists. As a result, spam had become a thorny problem for elected officials like Rep. Black, who typically had to go through 500 emails a day to get the 30 or so that he wanted to see.

In 2003, Rep. Black looked to the state's Legislative Technology Services Bureau (LTSB) - a nonpartisan service bureau that supports the Wisconsin legislature and its service agencies. LTSB provides a host of information technology services, including enterprise-level consulting in office automation, payroll and accounting; constituent database support; Internet access; bill drafting; statute production; administrative code; legislative document publication; and demographic and geographic analysis.

LTSB was testing spam filters, and they had zeroed in on Audiotrieve's InBoxer spam filter. While many filters can stop large amounts of spam, it was critical to select a spam filter that would not accidentally block mail from a constituent. Constituents can write



Rep. Spencer Black in his office

about any topic, including about spam, drugs, financial scams or other topics that traditional spam filters might block. InBoxer is a PC-based solution that is highly customized to the types of email the user tends to receive, based on what's already in the user's Inbox. InBoxer continually "learns" from the user's preferences as new mail arrives. It was important to the LTSB that at least one legislator be among those testing the solution, and Rep. Black volunteered to be among them.

"I was happy with the results," Rep. Black recalled. "It's not perfect. I might still get 10 or 20 spam emails in my Inbox. But that's a lot better than 500. And it gets better as it learns."

Rep. Black has a particular issue with spam emails from African countries - an especially pervasive variant of spam in which senders fraudulently disguise themselves as political refugees and implore the recipient for financial assistance. Because those emails contain references to political leaders and government ministries, a spam filter might consider those emails legitimate for a state legislator.

In Rep. Black's case, many of these African spams may also contain references to mining, and strip mining is one of the issues Rep. Black has passionately fought against, not only as a state legislator, but also as a former conservation representative for the Sierra Club. These nuances make the job of spam filters more complex. Since one person's spam is another person's valued communication, spam filters need to be customizable to the user's individual interests - and that's what InBoxer is designed to do.

As a result of a successful trial, InBoxer is currently installed widely throughout the state legislature, which consists of 130 legislators and their staff members in Madison and their home districts, as well as many of its service agencies, including the Legislative Audit Bureau.

"Having a reliable spam filter turned a major problem into a minor annoyance. I went from telling people not to email me, to strongly encouraging them. As someone who cares deeply about connecting with my constituents, email will continue to be an important vehicle for me," Rep. Black commented.

"And as someone who has worked hard to defend the environment, I'm happy to see a reduction in paper mail as well," he added.