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## Record Bad Year For Tech Security

**Paper says 2005 saw the most computer security breaches ever;  
more than 55M Americans exposed.**

NEW YORK (CNNMoney.com) - 2005 saw the most computer security breaches ever, subjecting millions of Americans to potential identity fraud, according to a report published Thursday.

The Treasury Department says that cyber crime has now outgrown illegal drug sales in annual proceeds, netting an estimated \$105 billion in 2004, the report said.

It is difficult to gauge the true number of security failures because many companies are unaware they've been hacked, the paper said.

### AOL Releases Top 10 Spam List

In its annual analysis of mass e-mail attacks, AOL reports that spammers are using more "special order"-type subject lines to mislead people.

AOL's Top 10 Spam List this year shows that instead of generic pitches for products, specificity is now the favored approach by those attempting to trick people into opening otherwise unwanted e-mails.

"Spammers are getting more devious, hoping to cash in through identity theft and phishing attempts," said AOL spokesperson Nicholas Graham. "They are distributing e-mails that attempt to get people to reveal sensitive information such as bank account and credit card numbers, or to hijack a user's PC."

Examples of spam on this year's list include "Your Mortgage Application is Ready," "Online Prescriptions Made Easy," and one from "Lisa" that claims to have "sent you to the wrong site." Unsuspecting folks are lured into providing personal information through such bogus sales offers, said Graham.

Other ruses on the list include pitches for products that claim to improve physical appearance and sexual prowess, and free offers for items like the iPod Nano and Xbox 360.

### AOL's 2005 Top 10 global spam messages, by subject line:

1. Donald Trump Wants You - Please Respond
2. Double Standards New Product
3. Body Wrap: Lose 6-20 inches in one hour
4. Get an Apple iPod Nano, PS3 or Xbox 360 for Free
5. It's Lisa, I must have sent you to the wrong site
6. Breaking Stock News\*\* Small Cap Issue Poised to Triple
7. Thank you for your business. Shipment notification
8. (IMPORTANT) Your Mortgage Application is Ready
9. Thank you: Your \$199 Rolex Special Included
10. Online Prescriptions Made Easy

AOL reported progress overall in stemming spam in 2005. The company said that spam reaching its customers has declined by more than 75 percent since its peak in late 2003, as measured by member complaints.

AOL claimed that this year, it blocked an average of 1.5 billion spam messages each day, or a total of 556 billion blocked messages for the year. Those messages accounted for 80 percent of all e-mail that reached AOL's gateway, the company said. ■

# Googleites Gripe About Sloppy Service



Michele Neylon was once very happy with Urchin Software Corp., which provides a service to analyze Web site traffic.

But ever since search giant Google Inc. bought Urchin in March, he's changed his tune. His problem is with Google's customer service.

"If you choose to deal with Urchin in the Google era, you will not get any personal attention and will have no indication of who you are actually dealing with. For all I know, all my e-mails could be answered by a computer," said the managing director of Blacknight Internet Solutions Ltd., a Web hosting and domain registrar.

"Everybody loves Google. Google can do no wrong. I would disagree."

Since its launch in 1995, Google Inc. has built up a 400 million-plus customer following that arguably has the same level of endearment as the infamously-smitten Apple Computer devotees.

But the honeymoon is clearly now ending. An uncharacteristically high level of frustration about Google, and more specifically its customer service, has been boiling away for months, according to online rants, Google customer surveys and several recent interviews with Google users.

Gripes are coming from the most casual of Google customers on up to the corporations buying Google's search hardware for their computer networks.

For example, a search vendor fumed in June that, "if your company was worth \$70 billion, would you have an automated message answer the front-desk phone

number, or have a live human take the message?"

He had just called Google Australia's office with an urgent request, then had to leave a message in a general voice mailbox.

"I'm losing business, and all I get from Google is an e-mail? Sheesh," said Peter John, a New Jersey-based operator of shopping Web sites.

Consumers of Google Analytics, the name for the Urchin Web features, in November boiled over after a rush of customers overwhelmed the feature.

These are not isolated incidents. The Search Engine Marketing Professional Organization dubbed Google's customer service "worse than bad" after a recent survey of companies advertising on the Internet.

Well-known media analyst Jack Myers' annual survey of advertising customer satisfaction routinely finds that advertisers aren't entirely happy with Google's customer service.

In many ways, Google's customer service is being stretched thin as a result of its own enormous success.

It was never one for customer service to begin with. It didn't need to be. In its earliest days, there really was no need thanks to a downright anorexic Web site leaving little doubt how Google operated.

Google's front page now leads to an increasingly sophisticated array of features that require more Internet savvy than an average user might normally have.

It's commonly-held that the more complex the feature, the more people are going to be in need of help, despite Google's already-storied talents at highly intuitive user interfaces.

Perhaps even more importantly, Google is expanding way beyond just providing free, ad-sponsored Internet search. In

so doing, it is taking on more demanding customers.

Google is mainly used to dealing with companies taking out ads on Google Web pages. While the ads don't cost that much, they have added up to billions in revenues every year.

But here come the big ticket items, and their higher level of customer service expectations. Google now sells networking hardware to trick out corporate computer intranets, and the most expensive have a five figure price tag.

According to various sources, Google's likely to offer an array of other more mainstream commercial services in the near future, thus forcing even more pressure on its customer service.

These may include desktop software, and a retailing feature to grow out of Google Base, Google's free classified ad listing Web site.

Google has also reserved the right to start charging for access to what is now a free, citywide Wi-Fi network that it is building in Mountain View, Calif.

Google has even hinted at an Expedia-like travel planning and price comparison offering.

So just what does Google do for customer service?

Google's audience is too large and too widespread to allow for dealing personally with each complaint. So the company created largely e-mail based system that relies, it appears, on first learning of breakdowns, glitches and other problems from customers, then acting upon the information.

This mechanism, commonly used by large Internet-based companies, does work. For instance, it helped Google learn of a recent glitch in its Google Base classified listings service that created a flood of porn advertisements in search results.

Also, like much of the business that companies do on the Internet, a lot of

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Google's customer service is done via e-mails rather than in person. The e-mail responses, though, "can be a bit frustrating when the response is too generic or when the customer service representative accidentally selects the wrong form letter response," search commentator John Battelle notes.

If a more personal response is necessary, Google tends to use teams of customer service reps, rather than assigning just one to the issue. It may help with the work load, but Battelle opines that it "probably exaggerates some of the discontent."

Google's Fischer, in an interview Friday, said its customer service operates on a kind of sliding scale of manpower.

Frequently asked questions sections, written instructions and other explanatory material available online is meant to sate inquiries about Google's free Internet search features.

Google's main source of revenue, get more interaction depending on their volume of ads. Smaller advertisers, the one-timers, must contend with e-mail or online help resources. Larger advertisers

get phone support or other live help, while Google's biggest accounts have their own teams of Google employees working directly with them.

Fischer would not disclose how many actual customer service reps Google employs, nor the number of customer inquiries or complaints handled via e-mail versus over the phone with a Google employee.

But whether it agrees with its customers or not, Google is now taking strides to improve the situation.

For one, it has begun an experiment in London dubbed "Google Space" to get customer feedback, which is one way to improve its flagging customer service efforts.

"It's enlightening in that we've been learning tons about how to make our products more useful," Andy Ku, International Product Marketing Manager wrote on Google's official blog in mid-December.

The search giant is apparently also planning to devote some space to

additional customer service reps within the Googleplex, as its dubbed, which is a proposed million-square-foot Google campus at the NASA Ames Research Center that Google has designs on building.

But despite all the efforts, the present state of Google customer service is clearly not enough, say industry insiders, competitors and—judging by the firestorm of protest on Internet forums—Google's own customers.

To be sure, Google's customer service does have many fans. But for every "Tony" and his positive experience about exchanging a Google lava lap ("I'd go with a nice big 10 on the customer service part" he wrote in an e-mail), there are 10 others frustrated by being stuck in a world of automated responses, script-following customer service reps and long delays between communications.

"Google customer service? That's an oxymoron," said one frustrated Googleite, requesting anonymity so as not to damage her relationship with Google. ■

## Virus Disguises Itself As Msn Messenger Beta

**A virus masquerading as a new beta version of Microsoft's MSN Messenger has begun circulating, antivirus company F-Secure said on its blog Tuesday.**

**T**he virus, which F-Secure calls Virkel.F, comes as a file called BETA8WEBINSTALL.EXE that can be downloaded from a Web site. Running the program installs not a new MSN Messenger beta, but rather a virus that sends download links to a computer user's MSN Messenger buddies. The virus falsely labels the link as "MSN Messenger 8 Working BETA."

"It also connects your machine to a botnet server," F-Secure warned, meaning that a person's computer can be controlled remotely to attack other machines or send spam.

Malicious software that uses instant messenger programs is growing more common. A November study by Akonix Systems identified 62 examples. And Microsoft's instant-messenger infrastructure is the most popular conduit for attack, IMLogic said in an October study. ■

# Accountant's Corner

## New Tax Credit for 2006

New and improved hybrid car incentives—full-dollar tax credits—took effect on Jan. 1, 2006. For most hybrid car buyers, the new credits are more valuable than the prior federal tax incentives, which were a reduction of taxable income.

If that's confusing to you, then don't try to understand the complex formula used to calculate the exact tax credit amount for each hybrid under the new law. The I.R.S. will provide those amounts. In the meantime, the American Council for an Energy Efficient Economy (ACEEE) has provided the following estimates.

### Current Models

Make Model	Estimated Tax Credit
Ford Escape Hybrid (2wd)	\$2,600
Ford Escape Hybrid (4wd)	\$1,950
Honda Accord Hybrid	\$650
Honda Civic Hybrid (auto)	\$2,100
Honda Civic Hybrid (manual)	\$1,700
Honda Insight (auto)	\$2,600
Lexus RX400h	\$2,200
Mercury Mariner Hybrid	\$1,950
Toyota Highlander Hybrid (2wd)	\$2,600
Toyota Highlander Hybrid (4wd)	\$2,200
Toyota Prius	\$3,150

### Upcoming Models (based on estimated specs)

Chevrolet/GMC Silverado/Sierra	\$250
Chevrolet/GMC Silverado/Sierra	\$250
Lexus GS450h	\$1,300
Nissan Altima	\$1,300
Toyota Camry	\$1,300

Again, these are estimates. We will need to wait for official announcements from the I.R.S. to determine exact hybrid tax credit amounts. The basic rules:

Purchase and take delivery of a qualifying vehicle on or after Jan. 1, 2006.

Purchase the vehicle new, not used.

Purchase the vehicle with the intention of using it, not re-selling it.

These rules are relatively straight-forward. But there's more that's a bit foggy:

The new tax credit sets a limit of 60,000 hybrids per carmaker. After hitting that mark (apparently based on the quantity of hybrid vehicles manufactured and delivered to dealerships, rather than hybrids actually sold), the credits for those hybrids will phase out over a 15-month period. Exactly when those limits are hit, and the resulting amounts of the credits during the phase-out period, is unclear. According to Toyota, "the reductions

may begin to apply as early as deliveries after either June 30, 2006 or September 30, 2006." The reductions may begin to apply for Honda hybrids later in 2006 or early 2007.

The tax law probably does not allow a taxpayer to lease a qualifying vehicle, but some language in the Energy Act's provision about the tax credit make mention of "lessor." The IRS has apparently not made a final determination, but it's advisable not to lease if you want to take advantage of the tax credit.

The new law for the hybrid tax credit might require taxpayers to recapture their hybrid tax credit if they resell their hybrid car or truck.

As you might guess, it's a good idea to get advice from a tax professional before filing. ■

