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Are Hotmail cutting their own throat

Just recently I decided to do a bit of house work on my server and DNS, and one of the things I did was do some research on SPF (Sender Policy Framework) and publish an SPF policy for my domains. However, after doing this I noticed something strange in that no emails I sent to family and friends using a Hotmail account ever received them. Nothing in their inbox or even their junk email folder, and no NDR (Non Delivery Report) was ever returned to my server. The emails just disappeared without a trace.

I scanned my email server logs and found that all the email destined for Hotmail had been successfully sent and had been queued by the Hotmail email servers, so the email was definitely disappearing at the Hotmail end of the line. After having buried myself in the problem for a good week reading every Hotmail postmaster FAQ and guideline I could find, and even contacting Hotmail support several times I still had no solution to the problem. I could not send email to any Hotmail account unless it was a reply. This got me thinking; are all free email services this hard to deal with, or is there something seriously wrong with my email environment that I have somehow missed. So I did a quick search to find the top ten free email services and proceeded to register an account with all of them to see if I could send mail to them. The results were quite surprising.

My Email Environment

Before we continue, lets step back a couple of paces and take a quick look at my email setup. For any domain this is essentially broken up into two parts, your DNS and IP settings, and then your email server itself. First, let's look at my DNS and IP settings;

DNS & IP

- . Static IP address for my email server
- . A record of mail.iis-aid.com pointing to the IP of my email server
- . PTR (reverse DNS) record of mail.iis-aid.com for my email server IP
- . MX record pointing to the mail.iis-aid.com A record with a preference of 5
- . SPF V1 policy (TXT record) that strictly specifies which servers should be sending email from my domain
- . SPF V2/PRA policy (TXT record)

Now let's take a look at my email server;

Email Server

- . Mail server displays host name in greeting
- . Acceptance of null sender address
- . Acceptance of postmaster address
- . Acceptance of abuse address
- . Mail server is not open relay

About the only thing my email server doesn't do is the acceptance of domain literals ([x@123.123.123.123](#)), but very few email servers do these days since virtual domains have become so popular. For a more complete run down you can see how my email environment checks out using [DNS Report](#). Why not check your own while there. You can also check your SPF polices are valid using [Open SPF](#) and [SEO Consultants](#), and check for open relay at [Abuse.net](#) and [Aupads.org](#).

Hotmail says I send Spam

Spam is a big problem for everyone. [Postini](#) estimate that spam now accounts for approximately 87% of all email on the Internet. There are several technologies that greatly reduce its penetration though, especially when used in combination. The exact technologies used by Hotmail are not clear, but if you're having problems sending to Hotmail it might be worth having a look through their various [FAQ's](#), [guidelines](#), [anti-spam policies](#), and [services](#) aimed towards the sender. If you wade through all this and are confident your environment checks out but are still having no success sending to Hotmail, you can always [contact their support staff](#), which is exactly what I did.

The response I got from Hotmail support was that their SmartScreen technology had identified email coming from my domain as being spam and had blocked my email server IP. Now, even if I was sending spam, somehow blacklisting the IP regardless of what other domains are sending email through that server does not seem especially "smart" to me. Hotmail support would not tell me why my domain was being flagged for spam, and when asked what the possible solutions were I was told I could sign up for 3rd party accreditation through [Sender Score Certified](#) (at a cost of \$400USD start up, and \$1000USD each year) who maintain the only whitelist service Hotmail use, and was also advised I could try tightening my SPF policy. Just to be especially vague the footer on the email also stated that there were no guarantees that any of the solutions offered would work. Great! So I could end up paying \$1400USD to be accredited by a 3rd party whitelist just so I can send to Hotmail, and there is still no guarantee that if I get accreditation that my mail will get through.

I took the other option and tightened my SPF policy so that it explicitly stated what servers were able to send email on behalf of my domain using the "-all" option. I waited 72 hours as the hotmail support said it would take to update Hotmail's various caches, but still I could not send emails to Hotmail. I then came across [this article](#) on openspf which pointed out that in fact the SenderID technology which Microsoft had championed (and Hotmail use) as another anti spam technology was in fact highly incompatible with SPF policies. Microsoft were apparently even made aware of this prior to the final release, but did not

do anything to correct it despite there being hundreds of thousands of domains with active SPF policies in effect at the time. I updated my domain with a SenderID policy and waited another 72 hours but still the problem persisted. I contacted hotmail support again who informed me that if SmartScreen was flagging my email server IP due to a reputation issue (or lack of it) then it might take longer than 72 hours for the problem to rectify itself.

How do I fare with other free email providers

This explanation did not sit right with me as I knew I had a reasonably tight email setup, plus the fact that I still get half a dozen or so emails a week in my Hotmail account that are obviously spam which go directly to my inbox. As a test I decided I would sign up with several other free email service providers and see what happened to my email when sending to those accounts. I did a quick search on the most popular free email services in use today, and found [this article](#). I went ahead and signed up an account with each of the following providers leaving the spam filtering in each of them to the default settings, and sent each of them an identical email;

- . [Gmail](#)
- . [Inbox](#)
- . [FastMail](#)
- . [Yahoo](#)
- . [AOL Mail](#)
- . [HotPOP](#)
- . [Groowy Email](#)
- . [MSN Hotmail](#)
- . [BigString](#)
- . [My Way Mail](#)

How did it turn out? **Well, after testing all ten accounts I can say that Hotmail was the only provider that did not deliver my mail.** Not only that, but my email went straight to the inbox with 8 of those providers. The mail I sent to my Inbox account arrived, but was directed to the spam folder. I raised three support tickets with Inbox support asking why my mail was sent to the spam folder, but the only reply I ever got was to loosen my spam filtering or add my address to the whitelist. I tried to explaining that wasn't the point, but could never get my message through. I took some solace in the fact that mail sent from my Gmail and Yahoo accounts to my Inbox account were also sent to the spam folder.

UPDATE: Email clients play a role too

While reading back through this article I noticed that it was totally server centric, with no consideration of what an individual email client might be doing to effect an emails deliverability to Hotmail. Email clients are responsible for

adding header information which is widely used for aiding in anti spam purposes.

I started playing around with clients rather than concentrating on server setup, and I've had some interesting results. I can send to Hotmail without a problem using Outlook 2003, but no cigar with Mozilla Thunderbird. I haven't tested other email clients yet, but I think that this suggests that the headers the email clients add to an email also play a crucial role in determining if the mail gets through or not. This is BAD news because as a system admin there is generally very little you can do about this. I'll be interested to continue testing, especially with the user-agent and x-mailer headers.

Conclusion

This one should not be a hard one to come to. If people are not able to be confident that mail sent to Hotmail will get there, then why use their services? Especially when there are so many other players in the field. I have now configured rules for this website that ban the use of Hotmail addresses during signup, and have configured my email server to send a message to any of my users sending to a Hotmail account informing them that their email is unlikely to get through. I realise that me banning Hotmail is not going to make any difference, but get 1000, then 10,000 the 100,000 other webmasters just like me doing the same thing and you really have to ask yourself. Are Hotmail cutting their own throat?