

Robin's Mail Quest

E-mail is a wonderful invention, isn't it? Millions of people send billions of messages across the globe every single day. Ever wonder how it gets there? Sometimes e-mail arrives in seconds, and other times it can take a long time. Often it is helpful to understand how something works to figure out where the problem lies.

Let's say our hero Robin wants to send an e-mail to his sweetie Mary, on her birthday. A noble endeavor! Robin pulls up his favorite *e-mail client* (an e-mail client program, like Outlook, lets users read, compose, and send mail) and starts a new message. The first thing he does is type in the Mary's e-mail address, maryn@teamITS.com.

Let's break that address down a bit. The last part of the address, *teamITS.com*, is the *domain*. Similar to a ZIP code, this tells Robin's mail server where to send the message. The *.com* part is referred to as a *top-level domain*. Other top-level domains include *.net* and *.edu*, as well as country codes such as *.uk* and *.tv*. The first part of Mary's address, *maryn@*, is for Mary's mail server, telling it in which mailbox Robin's message should be delivered.

Meanwhile, our hero Robin composes an eloquent message congratulating Mary on surviving yet another year. Finished, he clicks his Send button, and returns to work. At this point Robin's outgoing mail server accepts the message for later delivery. In this case, Robin's outgoing mail server is handled by his company's web hosting provider, but

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Keys To A Successful Web Site

Web sites generally serve one of two main purposes: to save time, or disseminate information. Think about the web sites you frequent for a minute; they probably fit one or both of these categories. For example, a bank whose web site allows online account access certainly saves time for both customers and bank staff, while providing up-to-the-minute data to customers.

To begin, write down the goals for your web site. Maybe there are just a few, but for some organizations there may be many goals. Having a list makes it easy to see how well your web site is meeting your goals, and what needs to be improved. Ultimately a successful web site should accomplish its goals. Every business should be all for saving time (a.k.a. money) and improving customer relations, but the question is, how to best accomplish that online?

Saving Time

Time savings for a web site can target several different groups, such as employees, customers, and prospective customers. An informational web site can offload everyday inquiries about product information from staff, while at the same time allowing customers or prospects to obtain information about your products or services 24 hours a day at their convenience, even late at night once the kids are in bed.

Analyze your company and see if you can spot where your employees spend a lot of time during the day. If someone spends a few hours a day processing returns or keying order information, perhaps that function can be moved to the web, freeing that person for other tasks. If customers are filling out and faxing over a paper form anyway, many will find it just as easy to type

the information in online. Allowing customers to look up returns or order status online further saves employee time.

Analyze how your target groups want or expect to use your web site. Put links to frequently used areas on the home page. Why make a bank customer click through several pages to log in when they can log in to their account directly from the home page?

Keep 'Em Coming Back

Find a way to keep customers interested in your site. First and foremost, your web site should be fast, and easy to navigate. Users will give up waiting for a site whose pages are slow to load, or if they cannot figure out where to find the information they desire. Worse, their annoyance with your company grows with their frustration. Similarly, the need for reliable web hosting increases as your site traffic and e-mail usage increase. If prospective customers can't connect to your web server or can't reach you via e-mail they

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We're Changing!

Later this fall ITS will start delivering *The ITS Connection* in a new format ...electronically! Our plan is to provide more frequent tips and news. Our print version will continue but most likely will decrease in frequency to once or twice per year.

To ensure you keep receiving our **free** newsletter including our tips, Q&A, and articles, please visit our newly redesigned web site, **teamITS.com**, to register your e-mail address. Please also let us know if you have any suggestions as to how we can improve *The ITS Connection*.

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will likely continue down their search engine results and end up somewhere else. There are many ways to optimize images, navigation, and page code to provide speedy page downloads and provide nice-looking, search engine-friendly pages. If you are not familiar with the newer web design technologies such as CSS, you should do some research or get help from a professional such as ITS.

Regular updates to your site not only invite visitors to look deeper, but can encourage search engines to rank your site higher in search results. Consider becoming an "authority" in your industry by publishing opinions, white papers, or articles of interest to your customer base on your web site. These should help people find their way to your site via search engines, especially if other sites link to yours.

Savvy webmasters will try to get other sites to publish articles for free, in exchange for a link back to the author's web site. This also typically helps search engine rankings. The recent popularity of *blogs* (short for web logs, which one might think of as a diary crossed with an opinion column) plays upon the desire for new information as well. Allow readers to send their friends links to an article they find interesting. The *What's New In IT* RSS news feed and online newsletter archive on teamITS.com are examples of these techniques.

Check your web site statistics reports to find out if any pages might still have links to pages that have moved, rendering the links inoperable. For example, most of ITS's web hosting plans have statistics that are accessible at www.example.com/urchin (use your domain name, of course). When a user types in or clicks a bad or outdated link, instead of a generic "page not found" error message have your web site display a more helpful page with links to main areas of your site, or possibly a way to search your site.

Providing value to your customers will increase usage of your web site, thereby providing a gateway to meet your other online goals.

Trends

The Incredible Shrinking Hard Drive

Anyone familiar with hard drive technology knows that over time hard drives have always become faster, cheaper, and smaller. That may not be a great formula for hard drive manufacturers, but it is great for us consumers!

As readers of our "What's New" online news feed know, this summer Samsung announced a revolutionary 16 GB hard drive that has no moving parts. The flash-memory based drive is silent, plus it uses less power and provides greater speed than today's hard drives which use a spinning disk platter, not unlike a record player.

Samsung's new 16 GB drive is a direct replacement for 2.5 inch hard drives, and there will also be 4 GB and 8 GB versions in a 1.8-inch form factor. Samsung expects to have a 100 GB version available "in a couple of years" as flash prices continue to drop.

Amazingly, in September Samsung also announced plans for a 32 GB

removable memory card designed for portable devices such as cell phones. This technology would allow around 8,000 MP3 songs or 20 full length DVD movies to fit onto a cell phone.

In addition to flash memory based storage, traditional hard drive vendors continue to shrink their products. For example Hitachi has announced higher capacity one-inch hard drives.

One-inch drives are commonly used in portable consumer electronics devices like digital music players, providing lighter weight and longer battery life. Eventually we expect cell phones, Palm-like devices and other portable products to incorporate traditional and solid-state hard drives as demand for storage and speed increase and prices fall.

As we went to press, Apple announced a new iPod model, the iPod nano, which uses flash memory storage rather than a traditional hard drive.

Humor

Technology for Country Folk

by unknown

Log on: Makin' a wood stove hotter.

Log off: Don't add no more wood.

Monitor: Keepin' an eye on the wood stove.

Download: Gettin' the farwood off the truk.

Mega Hertz: When yer not kerful gettin' the farwood.

Floppy Disc: Watcha git from tryin' to carry too much farwood.

Hard Drive: Gettin' home in the winter time.

Prompt: Whut the mail ain't in the winter time.

Windows: Whut to shut wen it's cold outside.

Screen: Whut to shut wen it's blak fly season.

Byte: Whut them dang flies do.

Chip: Munchies fer the TV.

Microchip: Whut's in the bottom of the munchie bag.

Modem: Whut cha did to the hay fields.

Laptop: Whar the kitty sleeps.

Keyboard: Whar ya hang the dang keys.

Software: Them dang plastic forks and knifs.

Mouse: Whut eats the grain in the barn.

Mainframe: Holds up the barn roof.

Enter: Northerner talk fer "C'mon in, ya'll."

Random Access Memory: Wen ya cain't 'member whut ya paid fer the rifle wen yore wife asks.

Web Site: Whar the spiders are.

Internet: Ketchin' fish without a pole.

Tips

Our Favorite Tips: Outlook Express

Store old mail (Simon). Click File/New/Folder... to create an extra folder for storing mail from or to a specific customer, about a project, or for a certain year. You can create a folder underneath any other folder, or directly under Local Folders.

Keep your folders empty (Steve). Clients often ask ITS about problems sending or receiving mail in Outlook Express. As we covered in last issue's Q&A, cleaning out the Inbox, Sent Items and Deleted Items folders are crucial to keeping mail flowing.

Color code messages (Amy). Click Tools/Message Rules/Mail. Create a new message rule (if you don't have any rules yet, it will start a new rule for you). Select *Where the From line contains people* and the action *Highlight it with color*. Click "people" and add the e-mail address you wish to color code. Click "color" and choose a color from the list. Rename the rule and click OK to save.

Sort mail automatically (Steve). We all keep too much mail. Why not let your mail program do some of your work for you? Use Message Rules to automatically sort incoming mail to specific folders. For example, create an "ITS" folder and then create a Message Rule to sort all mail with "@teamITS.com" in the "from" line into that folder.

Back up important mail (Steve). Normally e-mail is downloaded to each user's computer. Should you be backing up certain users' e-mail every night when you back up the data on your file server? Are you?

Sign your e-mail (Simon). Click Tools/Options... and then select the Signatures tab to automatically add a signature block to outgoing messages. Typical usage includes a user's name, company, and contact information. If you check mail from multiple mailboxes you can even set up more than one signature for your replies.

Q & A

Should I install the updates Microsoft keeps telling me are ready to download?

Typically, yes. ITS recommends you avoid downloading "service packs" for Windows via Windows Update, but in general all the other "critical" updates are a good idea to install as soon as they come out, to keep your computer protected against the latest security threats. As we mentioned in the "What's New" section of our web site, Microsoft is phasing out Windows Update in favor of Microsoft Update, which will also download updates for other programs such as Microsoft Office.

Can I turn off the balloon popups telling me new updates are ready?

You can, but we suggest you install the updates instead. To disable the Windows Update alerts, open your Control Panel and find the System icon (it may be under "Performance and

Maintenance" if you have the Category view enabled). Open System, and click the "Automatic Updates" tab to see your options.

When I retrieve new e-mail where is it stored?

The vast majority of e-mail programs use the POP3 protocol, which by default downloads all new mail to your computer and then deletes it from the e-mail server. Optionally one can tell the e-mail program to leave mail on the server for a given number of days, which can aid in downloading mail from multiple locations.

Web-based e-mail systems as well as the less common IMAP protocol leave all e-mail on the mail server. This makes Web-based e-mail perfect for checking one's mailbox from outside your office, at home, or at a friend's house, and then downloading your mail on your computer the next day as usual.

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sometimes a company will use their ISP's mail server or an internal mail server, like Microsoft Exchange or Mercury, instead. There is little difference, however sometimes a large ISP's mail system can become backlogged, delaying outgoing mail.

A short while later, Robin is startled to receive a message from a Mailer-Daemon! No, his PC doesn't need an exorcism. A *daemon* (generally pronounced dee-muhn) is a program that runs in the background on a server, a Unix server. In this case, the daemon is a mail server program. Praying to his gods for protection, Robin examines the daemon keeping his birthday message from his sweetie, and realizes that the message is from *mailer-daemon@example.com*, his own mail server! It seems Robin's message has been *bounced*, or rejected. Oh no! Has our fair maiden rejected Robin's message? Luckily the bounce message that Robin receives will contain the reason why his message was rejected.

Our hero's heart flutters as he reads the dreaded words, *User Unknown*, but he quickly realizes his mistake: a mere typo has awakened the daemon! In his haste to contact the maid Mary, Robin mistyped her address *martn@teamITS.com*. As a result, when Robin's mail server contacted the teamITS.com mail server to deliver his message, that server blocked the transfer, telling Robin's mail server that the mailbox "martn" does not exist. Robin's mail server then helpfully returned the "undeliverable" message to Robin.

Relieved, our hero opens his Sent folder and opens the message he just sent to Mary. Since Robin uses Outlook, he can click the *Actions/Resend This Message* menu item to easily reopen the message. Correcting the address, he again sends the e-mail. Now, at last, his fair maiden will receive his missive and rejoice!

Once Robin received the fair maid Mary N.'s response, of course, they lived happily ever after.

Services

- **Network design, installation, and support**
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- **Software- PBX/VoIP phone systems**
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