

Agloco Anti-Spam Policy In-Depth

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<http://blog.agloco.com>-----

Every now and then on this blog we will have another Member of the AGLOCO team share something from their point of view. This time, we have Ray Everett-Church, AGLOCO's Chief Privacy Officer, talking about our anti-spam policy.

I've been asked to put together a blog entry about the things I'm working on here at AGLOCO. Given that we're such a small team right now, many of us are wearing many different hats, and one of the hats I wear says "spam patrol."

Like all communities, AGLOCO has rules that help to keep our global community a comfortable and productive place. As everyone knows, one of the ways we grow our community is to encourage our current members to refer their family, friends, and acquaintances to sign up.

Because we create incentives around the referral process, it's no surprise that some people get the idea that they can take short cuts and play games to get more incentives than they may be entitled to. One of the ways that some people try to manipulate our referral system is to "spam," which we define generally as sending out unsolicited messages to unknown people.

Spam is always a problem with any online community, even from the earliest days of the Internet. I first started working on the problems created by spam as a consultant back in 1994 with a small but growing online community called America Online.

At the time we felt like we were breaking new ground and facing new issues almost every day. But in doing a little research back then I discovered that even in 1994, the problem of unsolicited messages online were an old issue. Much to my surprise, I found an early reference document written by Jon Postel, one of the creators of today's Internet, called "On the Junk Mail Problem". It was written in November of 1975!

I should note that, technically speaking, Postel's piece wasn't about "spam" as we know it today, rather it was about unwanted data flying around the early Internet, back in the days when only a handful of companies and universities were "online." But it shows that, even then, people were concerned about the negative effects of unwanted data being shoved their way.

Fast forward to today, and AGLOCO too must deal with the occasional problems created by members of the community who don't want to play by the rules and think they can get ahead by taking unfair shortcuts.

AGLOCO deals with these issues in a couple of ways. First, we have a strong anti-spam policy which every member agrees to as part of the member agreements during the sign up process. That policy puts everybody on notice that we will not tolerate abusive practices in promoting AGLOCO.

While email spam is one of the most common forms, we're also seeing message board and blog spam, instant message spam, and even spamming in the form of inappropriate entries in Wikipedia! Our anti-spam policy is written very broadly so that it can cover a wide array of abuses, even ones we haven't thought of yet.

Second, we have an email address — abuse@agloco.com — where complaints about spam may be reported. We encourage members of AGLOCO, and members of the public generally, to send us examples of any spam they receive. (If you do send us email spam, please make sure you include the full headers of the email message; it's vital for our investigation that we be able to trace the origins of those messages.)

While we can't respond individually to every complaint, we do review them all and when we see things that appear to be violations of our anti-spam policy, we take steps to investigate the incident and, if necessary, enforce our policy.

While I don't want to discuss the specifics of how we investigate and enforce our policy (I don't want to give the spammers ideas about how to evade our techniques), I will say that so far we have only had to terminate a few dozen member accounts. We have also issued a number of warnings to members whose behavior, while serious, may not have risen to a level that requires the ultimate punishment of account termination.

I don't want anybody to get the wrong idea: Our anti-spam policy is strong and gives us the ability to punish abuses. And from an enforcement perspective, the integrity of our community requires that we have a very low tolerance for abuse. But we also attempt to enforce it with a certain level of understanding.

We realize that not everyone is an expert in Internet community behavior and that well-intentioned people may

sometimes step out of line. As a result, we spend far more time educating members about responsible promotional practices than we do setting up firing squads.

I'm pleased to say that I'm pretty encouraged by the way AGLOCO members have been able to grow the community without resorting to tactics like spam. I think it's an indication not only of how great our members are, but of how seriously they take our anti-spam policy.

Because I've been involved with anti-spam issues for a very long time, I consulted a number of my colleagues in the field as we were setting up AGLOCO. A few of them were skeptical and predicted that AGLOCO would turn into a swamp of spam and abuse.

I'm very proud to say that those predictions have thus far been inaccurate. We have a strong, vibrant, and growing community in which the spam problem has been fairly minimal. We will continue to maintain vigilance, and act strongly to root out abuse whenever it occurs. But with your help, AGLOCO can keep spam to a minimum while we continue our current path of growth.

Ray Everett-Church
AGLOCO Development Team