

Fighting off the great spam attack

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By Cliff Taylor

The internet is under attack like never before, with spam accounting for 80 per cent of all emails sent worldwide, many of them money-making scams run by criminal gangs.

More than 90 per cent of small to medium-sized businesses in New Zealand are using filters to protect themselves, but Steve Martin, from information protection company Symantec, said nearly a third of what was still getting through was spam.

Martin said about a quarter of emails being received were spam and 37 per cent of respondents to a Symantec survey had been targeted by fraudsters.

Vodafone spokesman Dave Joyce said 98 per cent of emails sent to their server were blocked. "There is a lot of spam floating around out there."

Joyce did not want to divulge too much detail but said the company used "hardware-based" spam protection and also tried to weed out potential spammers who tried to sign up as customers.

Telecom's Xtra network is bombarded by about 120 million individual emails a week, only 20 million of which are legitimate. The rest are spam or viruses that the company filters from customers' inboxes.

"It is an ongoing battle, with spammers constantly evolving their tactics and providers such as Telecom are investing significant dollars and resources to protect customers," said a spokesman.

Martin said it was impossible to tell how much the problem was costing the New Zealand economy but the time used to deal with spam was significant.

Spam comes from some unlikely sources. Martin said a lot was sent from Guam, and Russian spam networks had moved their operations to China.

Martin suspected individual spammers were active in New Zealand as well. Most of the scams aim to obtain money in some form or another.

Martin said there was so much banking information on the internet that illegally obtained credit card details were sold for as little as 50 cents. Bank account details could be bought for \$1300.

Symantec said some of the recent methods used to lure internet users included a bogus lottery purportedly run by the Beijing Olympic Committee and bogus news headlines such as Latest! Obama Quits Presidential Race and Oprah Found Sleeping the Streets.

Spammers were also using more sophisticated emails to gather information, such as genuine company logos.

Martin advised users to be wary of clicking on any email which could pose a risk, especially anything related to banking, and to be wary of posting too much information on social networking sites.