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# When e-mail spam smacks of a scam

James Turner

Every once in a very great while, an intriguing piece of spam enters my e-mail inbox.

For example, when I got an incentive-laced offer to write product reviews for a Web site, I took notice.

The company, Editor's choice, claimed that (a) you will be able to keep the items you review and (b) the companies will be more than happy to send them.

Unfortunately, as with most spam, the reality doesn't live up to the hype.

Editor's Choice (sometimes called iNet Reviews in the spam), wants you to send them \$20 for a bunch of "review request sheets."

You then mail these sheets to companies offering their products for review. After writing your reviews, Editor's Choice is supposed to post them on their Web site ([www.revieweditor.com](http://www.revieweditor.com)), which claims to be "the largest consumer review service on the Internet," and send you more forms.

Unfortunately, the site is small, full of broken links, and badly formatted text.

For such a prominent review site, it also managed to avoid being listed in any major search engine. And in interviews with several people who have reviewed for Editor's Choice, none has ever received more forms without sending more money.

Contacting Editor's Choice is a challenge, too. The phone number to fax in orders and mailing address turns out to be a postal-service business in Norcross, Ga. The phone numbers for the owner of their Internet domain, one Kristen Matthews, are disconnected.

Another company, Electric Bookshelf, shares the same Norcross mailing address and is registered to a John Rapp, who shares the same fax number as Editor's Choice.

His voice-mail number is also disconnected.

The e-mail from Editor's Choice mentions a number of people by name, and products they have received.

Since a number of Intuit products (Turbotax, Quicken) were mentioned, I contacted Dru Gregory, a spokesman at Intuit in Mountain View, Calif.

She told me that the company's product department has received more than 60 of these forms in the past three years. Having never been able to get in touch with the proprietors, the sheets are now routinely thrown out.

Worse, Gene D'Onofrio of Rocky Hill, Conn., requested evaluations of several Husqvarna sewing machines. According to company spokeswoman Nancy Jewel, the Sweden-based manufacturer was glad to send them,

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especially after receiving its first glowing review.

Unfortunately, Ms. D'Onofrio was not aware that she was expected to return the \$2,700 worth of products after completing her evaluations. And since the company was unable to contact Editor's Choice, the machines remained in D'Onofrio's possession until I managed to contact her and explain the situation.

The Better Business Bureau of Atlanta reports that "the company has not responded to customer complaints brought to its attention by the Bureau."

Meanwhile, the Georgia Governor's Consumer Affairs Department "is aware of the company," says spokesman Bill Cloud, although there is little it can do since the company deals across state borders.

Besides, selling "review sheets," Editor's Choice's also sells an \$80 booklet entitled "Taking Your Idea to the Internet." But their strategy appears to be more about taking their customers for a ride.

\*James Turner is a computer consultant and avid Web user.

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