



Web Design Email Link Tutorial

by Jim Degerstrom

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of the Small Business Website Mailbag

Welcome to episode 37 entitled Web Design Email Link Tutorial.

The topic for today's show was selected after an inquiry from a realtor who needed advice because their website received over 300 spam emails per day. A technical solution to their problem was implemented months ago, and feedback from the client shows positive results. The problem, action plan, and outcome will be discussed in the case study. Here's the outline for today's program:

- Web Design and the Risk from Email Spammers
- Case Study of Realtor Website Spam Problem and Solution
- Range of Web Design Options for Email Spam Protection
- Javascript Option to Cloak Website Email Links
- Web Design Email Tutorial PDF Download Review
- Website Quick Tip of the Day - Procedure to Report Email Spammers

Web Design and the Risk from Email Spammers

First up we'll discuss Web Design and the Risk from Email Spammers. Providing full contact information on your website is key to establishing credibility and trust. Sites that make it difficult to contact the owner are more likely to lose visitors due to suspicion.

Making your email address public as one method of contact is highly recommended, yet the ugly downside is the risk of being picked up by spambots and ending up on junk email lists. There are several easy solutions to overcome the problem, and each will be discussed later in this web design email link tutorial.

Small business owners nagged by occasional spam messages may be fortunate. Others get 100's if not 1000's of spam messages per day while email software continues to evolve to presort incoming junk email from legitimate messages. My oldest email account is a Yahoo account that I no longer use except for free hosting of a personal family site that hasn't changed in 10 years, and then I log-in every month or two just to delete 1000+ junk mails.

Active email accounts used for business can't be abandoned because contact by email is a necessity. One thing owners can do is avoid the trap of footer messages that invite you to respond with "remove" in the subject box to be taken off a mailing list. Don't fall for the ploy. They will stop sending you email but sell your address to another spammer because your reply confirmed it was legitimate.

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The real risk is getting a high volume of spam and the time wasted sorting the junk from real prospects for your product or service. In most cases companies end up on spam junk email because of spambots. These are robots similar to search engine crawlers that visit websites just to access the code used to create the site. They are only looking for email addresses which they harvest and then add to junk mail lists.

Case Study of a Realtor Website Spam Problem and Solution

Next let's consider a Case Study of a Realtor Website Spam Problem and Solution that explains their problem, and then the technical method used to hide email addresses from spammers. This site owner received more than 350 junk mails on average per day. The email link on their site was a general delivery inbox for everyone in the company, and then realtors had individual email accounts, also. Imagine the amount of time it took to sort through that many messages to identify real prospects.

The solution was a technical method using code to cloak the email address to make it invisible to spambots. or rather than "cloak" the email address some designers prefer the term obfuscate the email. Each means the same.

The solution I provided uses javascript so the email address is presented to human visitors in the status bar at the bottom of their browser as they mouse over the link. However, the code that spambots access does not include the @ symbol or other clues that allow them to identify any email address on the page.

Within months the problem of 350+ spam emails per day was reduced by 90%.

Range of Web Design Options for Email Spam Protection

Next up is the Range of Web Design Options for Email Spam Protection. You have probably viewed email addresses on websites that eliminate the @ symbol by writing out the email address using the word "at" enclosed in brackets (like this [at]), so my email address using this would be info (with the word "at" in brackets) [at] jimdegerstrom.com. Spambots may miss that, yet site visitors may give up on emailing you if your email address is not a real link, and leave rather than be troubled typing your email address.

Another option is translating your email address into the ASCII code for each individual character that makes up your email address. Depending on the number of characters in your email, the final cloaked version would be 7 characters time the total number of characters. For mine which has 22, the cloaked email translated to ASCII would be 154 characters in the html code.

Example:

```
&#0105;&#0110;&#0102;&#0111;&#0064;&#0106;&#0105;&#0109;&#0100;&#0101;&#0103;&#0101;  
&#0114;&#0115;&#0116;&#0114;&#0111;&#0109;&#0046;&#0099;&#0111;&#0109;
```

Using that example, instead of info @ jimdegerstrom.com my email address would be 154 characters to copy and paste into the html. Browsers will correctly reformat that to the email address, yet spambots cannot read it. Learning all those ASCII codes might take an hour to translate, and

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fortunately a website has a free online tool for doing that translation instantly. A link to their site is in the show notes.

http://www.thepcmanwebsite.com/ascii_converter.shtml

The preferred method is using an external file in javascript because search engines (and spambots) cannot read javascript. The process requires three steps:

1. Create the javascript file with an extension .js and upload it to your server
2. Insert code in the top head section of your html document to reference that file
3. Insert a simple snippet of cloaked html code in the body of the html document

Javascript Option to Cloak Website Email Links

Here are details that you may copy and paste from the pdf tutorial for using the Javascript Option to Cloak Website Email Links. The javascript is shown in green in the pdf tutorial using my email address in the example.

```
/* This file prevents spambots from harvesting the email address of this website */  
function simple(name,text)  
{  
    var domain ="jimdegerstrom.com";  
    document.write('<a href="mailto:' + name + '@' + domain + '">' + text + '</a>');  
}
```

Step One

To customize this javascript code for your website copy and paste all of the above into a word processor and then change the domain name to yours. Please note that the www prefix is not required. Next, save the file with any name followed by the extension .js, so if you wanted it to be "cloak" name the file "cloak.js".

This file does not require a detailed understanding of javascript. In short, it takes your domain as the variable, and then inserts replacements for "name" and "text" from what you specify later as explained in step three.

Step Two

Using the file named "cloak.js" as an example, the pdf tutorial shows the code for the header section of your site to insert between the opening <head> tag and the closing </head> tag.

```
<script type="text/javascript" src="cloak.js"></script>
```

The example given has the javascript file in the root directory. If you decided to store it in a subfolder entitled script you would insert script with a forward slash (script/) before the word cloak as shown in the tutorial:

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```
<script type="text/javascript" src="script/cloak.js"></script>
```

This line in the header commands your visitor's browser to read the javascript file instructions in that file if it encounters the word "simple" in a script callout of your html code. Details are explained in step three.

Step Three

The final line of code to insert in your html document calls out the cloaked email link, and it is used within the <body> which contains the actual content for that page. The pdf tutorial shows the actual example.

```
<script type="text/javascript">simple('info','Email Me')</script>
```

The code shown instructs the visitor's browser that this is javascript, so look in the header for the file name, and then look for the command "simple" in that file. The information in parentheses that reads "info" and "Email Me" may be changed or customized based on your preferences.

For the first piece of information if you wanted the email to go to "john" at your domain, change the word "info" to "john". The second piece is what will actually display on the page for visitors to see, yet it is invisible to spambots. In this example the viewer would see "Email Me" so if you wanted the visible text to appear in the middle of a sentence you could change that from "Email Me" to "email us for more information".

Doing edits on the two pieces of information allows you to create multiple email links on one page going to more than one recipient as well as having a different phrase appear on the page for each link.

Web Design Email Tutorial PDF Download Review

Finally, here's a short comment on this Web Design Email Tutorial PDF Download Review. For listeners, the pdf download includes the code needed to implement this email cloaking solution, so I encourage visitors to download their free copy. You are not required to register or reveal an email address to take advantage of this web design email tutorial.

Website Quick Tip of the Day - Procedure to Report Email Spammers

UCE, or unsolicited commercial email, is illegal in the USA. International listeners must check their local regulations. If you own a small business in the USA, the Federal Trade Commission will investigate complaints of UCE. To report, all you must do is open the suspicious email and click "forward" and enter spam@uce.gov as the forwarding address, and then click "send" to submit your email to the FTC.

As a special note, if you have an existing business relationship with a company the rules are different. While it is legal to send email to known business contacts, your email message may not contain false or misleading routing information, but otherwise is exempt from most provisions of the CAN-SPAM Act.