WARNING

One thing is sure: Spam is not just annoying; it's dangerous. Besides filling up your users' inboxes with unwanted email, spam emails often carry attachments that harbor viruses or other malware, or entice your users to click links that take them to websites that can infect your network. If your network is ever taken down by a virus, there's a very good chance that the virus entered your network by way of spam.

So, understanding spam and taking precautions to block it are important parts of any network administrator's job.

Sampling the Many Flavors of Spam

Spam is unsolicited and/or unwanted email. That's a pretty broad definition, but there are several distinct categories of spam:

» **Advertisements:** Most spam is advertising from companies you've never heard of, trying to sell you products you aren't interested in. The most common type of product pitched by spam emails are pharmaceuticals, but spam also commonly promotes food supplements, knockoffs of expensive products such as watches or purses, weight-loss products, and so on.

» **Phishing emails:** Among the most annoying and dangerous types of spam are phishing emails, which try to get the recipient to divulge private information such as credit card account numbers or passwords. Phishing email masquerades as legitimate email from a bank or other well-known institution and often includes a link to a phony website that resembles the institution's actual website. For example, you might get an email informing you that there was a suspicious charge on your credit card, with a link you can click to log in to verify that the charge is legitimate. When you click the link, you're taken to a page that looks exactly like your credit card company's actual website. However, the phony page exists solely to harvest your username and password.

Another type of phishing email includes an attachment that claims to be an unpaid invoice or a failed parcel delivery notice. The attachment contains a Trojan that attempts to infect your computer with malware.

» **Scams:** The most common type of email scam is called an *advance-fee scam,* in which you're promised a large reward or prize in the future for advancing a relatively small amount of money now, in the form of a wire transfer or money order. You may have heard of or actually received the classic scam known as the Nigerian prince scam, in which a person claiming to be a Nigerian prince needs your help to transfer a huge amount of money (for example, $40 million) but can't use an African bank account. The prince needs to use your personal bank account, and will pay you a percentage — perhaps