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Here's an unanticipated consequence of the recession: the level of junk e-mail I get is rising rapidly.

And its not from the Viagra sites, the scammers, the enlarge some part of your body, or reduce some part of your body spammers. These are from legitimate retail companies, including some of the best known brands in the world. Companies that last year or the year before would never have dreamed of sending mass emails are now sending them almost daily.

When Congress passed the Can-Spam Act in 1998, they left a small loophole that allows a company to send you unsolicited commercial email — SPAM — if you have ever done business of any kind with them. So the company I bought a light bulb from five years ago now sends me weekly lists of their inventory. LLBean, who I do not ever recall buying anything from but did ask for a catalogue once, sends them twice a week. And so on until my inbox is crammed.

The problem is that the recession is not going away. Even the president is now talking in terms of a double-dip recession that may send us headlong into another deep decline next year. And the holiday season, while prices will crash and consumers may do okay, will likely be another disaster for retailers.

The retailers know this, so they are being their solicitations early and often. This serves two purposes. First, they can get their low prices in front of your eyes at a time when traditional media is stumbling. Second, they are hoping that the frequency of the notices might jar some consumers into impulse purchases.

The whole arena of online advertising is still in its infancy, and email marketing — while lucrative in some terms — is still an issue that both retailers and consumers struggle with. When is an email solicitation useful? When is it annoying? How to sort out the difference?

One thing I know for sure...if the sheer volume of these soliciations continues to rise,

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