

# Data thieves target e-mail addresses

By **Byron Acohido**, USA TODAY

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In the past four months, caches of customer e-mail addresses, not banking and credit card information, have become the key target of data thieves. The goal: Use the legitimate e-mail addresses and the specific companies their owners have business relationships with to get people to buy worthless goods or to infect their PCs.



A pedestrian uses a phone by a crosswalk in New York in January.

The recent theft of potentially tens of millions of consumer e-mail addresses from online marketing firm Epsilon followed a spate of similar hacks in December, USA TODAY research shows.

Web marketing and cybersecurity experts say there are several ways cybercriminals can make profitable use of the stolen e-mail addresses. Just like legit advertisers, criminals can correlate a person's demographics and shopping patterns "and use that to their advantage," says Thomas Jelneck, president of Internet marketing firm On Target Web Solutions.

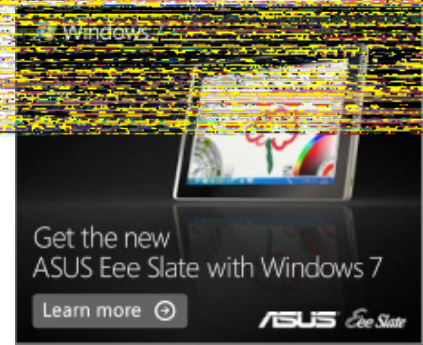
The Better Business Bureau, for instance, has issued a warning about a fake Chase Bank e-mail stemming from the undisclosed number of e-mail addresses that hackers stole from Epsilon. The security breach was disclosed last week. Some 50 Epsilon clients were affected, ranging from Chase Bank and Verizon to Hilton and Target. Those companies, in turn, have been sending e-mail warnings to their respective customers.

Loren Spallina, support manager at anti-virus maker PC Tools, says, "We're definitely expecting any number of potential malicious actions" making use of recently stolen e-mail addresses.

Dallas-based Epsilon is part of a cottage industry of companies that help major businesses use e-mail to offer promotions and special services to customers. Chenxi Wang, security and risk analyst at Forrester Research, says data thieves are taking advantage of the comparatively "immature" data security practices of those marketing companies.

In late December, Honda reported a hacker stole e-mail addresses to 2.2 million Honda owners and 2.7 million Acura owners. Also in December, data thieves stole 13 million e-mail addresses from the artists website DeviantArt, 1.3 million e-mail addresses from Gawker Media and an undisclosed number from McDonald's.

By correlating names and e-mail addresses with information about where a person banks and shops, criminals can more effectively bypass spam and anti-virus filters and fine-tune phishing attacks — spoofed messages designed to trick you into clicking on a viral



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attachment or poisoned Web link. The intruder then takes full control of the victim's PC. "The No. 1 attack vector today is the human," says Jose Granado, principal at Ernst & Young's information security practice.

From 2005 to 2009, most thefts of customer information from U.S. businesses targeted personally identifiable information or payment card data. But in the past four months, several major cyberattacks have targeted valid e-mail addresses for specific customers doing business with specific banks and merchants.

#### Data heists

- **Feb. 25, 2005.** [Bank of America](#). 1.2 million individuals' records lost via missing computer tapes, including Social Security numbers (SSNs), addresses and account numbers.
- **June 6, 2005.** [Citigroup](#). 3.9 million customer records lost via backup tapes during UPS shipping.
- **June 16, 2005.** CardSystems. 40 million payment card records taken via hack of third-party processor of payment card transactions.
- **Sept. 7, 2006.** [Circuit City](#) and Chase Card Services. 2.6 million payment card records lost via discarded computer data tapes.
- **Jan. 17, 2007.** TJX Cos. 100 million payment card transaction records lost to persistent intruders led by Albert Gonzalez.
- **July 3, 2007.** Fidelity National Information Services/Certegy Check Services. 8.5 million customer records stolen by insider.
- **Sept. 14, 2007.** [TD Ameritrade](#). 6.3 million customer records lost via hack.
- **March 17, 2008.** Hannaford Bros Supermarkets. 4.2 million customer records lost to hackers.
- **March 21, 2008.** Compass Bank. 1 million customer records stolen by former bank programmer.
- **March 26, 2008.** Bank of New York Mellon. 12.5 million customer records lost via stored data tapes that went missing.
- **Dec. 29, 2008.** RBS WorldPay. 1.1 million customer records, mostly payment card data, lost to hackers.
- **Jan. 20, 2009.** [Heartland Payment Systems](#). 130 million payment card transaction records exfiltrated by persistent intruders.

#### E-mail heists

- **Dec. 12, 2010.** Gawker. 1.3 million staff and user e-mails exposed. No SSNs or financial information taken. Hackers gained access to the site's database.
- **Dec. 14, 2010.** McDonald's, Arc Worldwide, Silverpop Systems. Unknown number of records lost. Hackers were able to access the information of McDonald's customers.
- **Dec. 17, 2010.** DeviantArt, Silverpop Systems. 13 million e-mail addresses, user names and birth dates of the entire DeviantArt user database exposed by hackers who were able to breach DeviantArt's marketing company Silverpop Systems.
- **Dec. 27, 2010.** American Honda Motor. 4.9 million customer e-mail addresses stolen, including valid e-mails for 2.2 million Honda owners, 2.7 million Acura owners. No other data breached.
- **April 2, 2011.** Epsilon. E-mail addresses and names only stolen from 50 of 2,500 large clients of third-party online marketing firm. Epsilon has not disclosed the names of the companies affected or the total number of names stolen. However, millions of customers

have received notices from a growing list of affected companies, making this the largest security breach ever.

Source: Privacy Rights Clearinghouse

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




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 <b>Kristi L</b> 9:35 PM on April 12, 2011 Score: 8	<p>CAUTION: The latest scam is an email from UPS, Fed Ex or DHL. They claim to have tracking information for a package for you and want you to open an attachment for the information. Those companies would include that number in the body of the email. Thieves get more creative every day.</p> <p>1 reply</p>	<p> </p> <p>  </p> <p>Report Abuse</p>
 <b>Donion Foops</b> 9:41 PM on April 12, 2011 Score: 4	<p>Thanks, Kristi.</p> <p>I always use false names and information whenever possible. But no one can prevent theft of data except by dropping entirely off the electronic system, if that's even possible.</p> <p>No electronic banking, no email, no mortgage applications, no marketing, no buying anything electronically.</p> <p>when I win the next hundred million dollar lottery, I'll try to drop out.</p> <p>If Abbie Hoffman can do it, maybe I can.</p>	<p> </p> <p>  </p> <p>Report Abuse</p>
 <b>Tito Sancho</b> 9:54 PM on April 12, 2011 Score: 0	<p>My personal email was hijacked recently and it sends marketing information to everyone in my distribution list. people have come to ignore it and I can;t seem to make it stop.</p> <p>3 replies</p>	<p> </p> <p>  </p> <p>Report Abuse</p>
 <b>mertair</b> 10:10 PM on April 12, 2011 Score: 9		<p> </p> <p>  </p> <p>Report Abuse</p>

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