

Email Authentication: 10 things you should know



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There's a lot of talk in email marketing circles about email authentication. We've developed this white paper to give marketers and non-technical professionals the basics about authentication, why you need to understand the concepts of authentication, and how it will shape future email marketing practices.

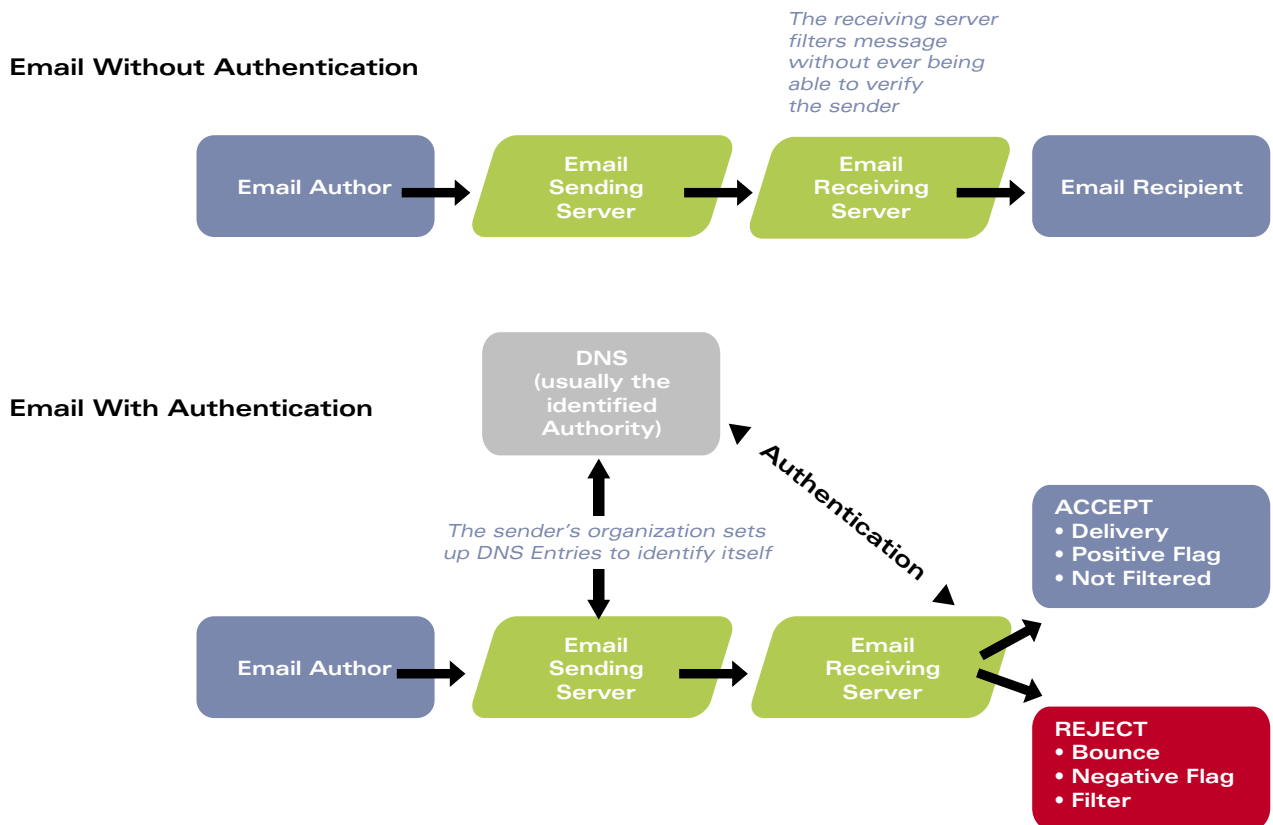
1. Email didn't anticipate its own success

Having gotten off to a sleepy start with primarily government and educational institutions in 1982, email's recent explosive commercial growth has made obvious some needs that could not have been realistically anticipated nearly 25 years ago.

2. Email authentication attempts to verify an email sender

The ability to forge the point of origin of an email is arguably one of the biggest contributors to the flood of illegitimate email today. Enter email authentication, which at its core process refers back to an identified authority to determine if an email message is truly from the origin identified in the message headers. Most of the current authentication methodologies refer back to the published DNS records of the sender. DNS records, which are authoritatively controlled by the domain owner, have emerged as a promising place to start the authentication process.

The chart below shows a VERY simplistic and conceptual view of email with and without authentication.



3. Authentication is not the magic bullet that will stop spam

Email authentication alone will not provide an end to spam. Authentication will do a good job of quickly reducing the number of phishing scandals and attacks. It's important to understand that email authentication is one of the first steps in more sophisticated processes that can help identify and verify what address an email message is coming from. Reputation systems will become an important step in this process, reducing SPAM by filtering bad messages more effectively.

4. Authentication does not suddenly get all of your email message delivered

Just as authentication does not stop all spam, it does not guarantee delivery of your email messages either. Even if you are authenticating correctly, ISPs can and will filter messages based on content, and, more importantly, reputation. Authentication only helps to identify and verify that email messages are actually coming from the stated sender.

5. Not all authentication is the same

There are three different technologies that have emerged as standards in email authentication: SPF, Sender ID and Domain Keys. Each of these has been embraced and implemented across major ISPs including AOL, Yahoo! and MSN/Hotmail. While each technology generates a similar result (identification and verification of an email sender), they do this in slightly different ways. SPF and Sender ID work with a stated declaration in a sender's DNS records. Domain Keys signs outgoing messages with an encrypted key that can be verified by the sender's public key included in their DNS. These differences become very technical very quickly, so we've provided some links at the end of this white paper if you wish to learn more.

6. Authentication can influence how a recipient views a message in his or her mailbox

Some email clients are starting to provide prompts in the user's inbox depending on whether the message was authenticated or not. For example, should a message not be authenticated, a recipient may be prompted to proceed with greater caution before responding or clicking links within the message. Consequently, senders who authenticate are viewed more favorably by both ISPs and recipients.

7. You cannot ignore authentication—adoption is quickly growing

AOL, Microsoft and Yahoo!, whose combined email accounts receive over 50 percent of all commercial email in the U.S., support at least one of the current authentication standards. As of November 2005, 70 percent of the Fortune 100 companies authenticated email with one of the three standards. Email authentication has reached critical mass, and it will continue to grow in importance for email delivery.

8. After authentication comes reputation

Where authentication methods like SPF, Sender ID and Domain Keys verify that senders are who they say they are, reputation systems take the sender's identity and check it against a database of its sending practices. Reputation systems check for things like bounce rates, unsubscribe practices and user complaints. Now that email authentication systems are in place, reputation becomes much more realistic and accurate to use in determining delivery or filtering.

9. Your email service provider should be aware of authentication trends and practices

If your ESP is not talking to you about email authentication, you need to ask them about their practices and policies. SubscriberMail remains at the forefront of emerging email technologies, as we continually strive to give our clients the best possible services and technology to enable the highest delivery of email messages.

10. There are many detailed (and very technical) resources for authentication protocols

We've compiled a few links below that can provide you with additional information.

Information on Sender ID

<http://www.microsoft.com/mscorp/safety/technologies/senderid/default.aspx>

Information on Sender Policy Framework (SPF)

<http://www.openspf.org>

Information on Domain Keys

<http://antispam.yahoo.com/domainkeys>

In-depth descriptions of email authentication

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Email_authentication

To find out more about our unique email marketing solutions, please email info@SubscriberMail.com, or call us at (630) 303-5000.

About SubscriberMail

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