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Software helps senators, firms mine, refine e-mail

By Greg Farrell
USA TODAY

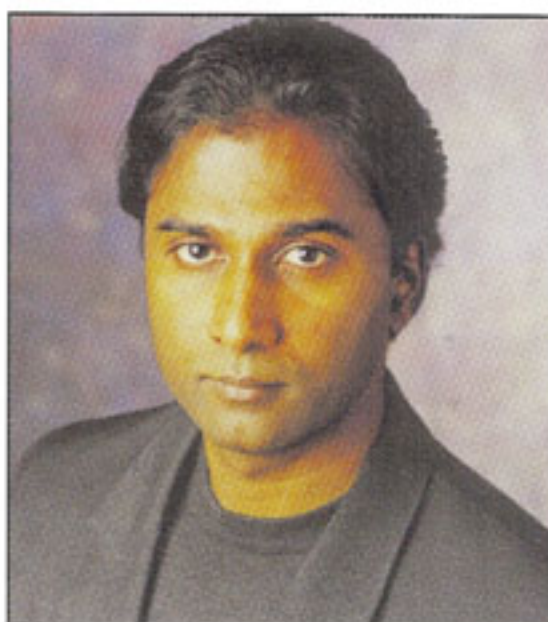
The next time you send e-mail to your U.S. senator, pay close attention to the reply: It was probably generated by a computer, not written by a human being.

The strange thing is, you probably won't notice any difference. More to the point, the technology that enables those responses to be written will eventually enable marketers to customize their products to consumers' tastes.

In recent months, the offices of senators including Charles Schumer, D-N.Y., Diane Feinstein, D-Calif., Bob Graham, D-Fla., and Judd Gregg, R-N.H., have adopted a technology that lets them respond to each and every e-mail. The software, designed by a company called EchoMail, weeds out spam and junk mail, and generates responses that are appropriate to the queries raised in the e-mails.

"A lot of the e-mails may seem like junk mail," says V.A. Shiva, EchoMail's founder and CEO. "But one senator's junk might be another's gold."

During President Clinton's impeachment proceedings, the volume of e-mail cascading into the Senate increased tenfold, to 500,000 per day, says Steve Walker, head of information technology, research and development at the Senate.



Shiva: EchoMail's building "a massive processing plant" for e-mail.

Walker, who hired EchoMail to manage the Senate's e-mail, is rolling out the software to as many senators as want it. "At some point, there's going to have to be total automation," he says.

"We're building a digital refinery for all their e-mails," Shiva says. "It's a massive processing plant."

For marketers, intelligent e-mail programs from companies such as EchoMail, Kana and Wired Empire can be a powerful market research tool. If a product generates tens of thousands of e-mails, these tools can determine the product's popularity almost instantly, on a scale much larger than any focus group.

"Traditional market research is so expensive," says Jim Nail, senior analyst at Forrester Research. "With a product like EchoMail, companies can hear

their customer's voice without all those layers in between. The Procter & Gambles of the world salivate to get that kind of contact with customers. If they have to

echomail

hire a whole bunch of bodies to read tens of thousands of e-mails, that won't work, either."

One client that is using EchoMail to help it improve relations with customers is P&G rival Unilever. "It's another tool you can use to get to one-to-one marketing," says Kevin Schroeder, Unilever business technology manager.

Unilever uses EchoMail to track and respond to all of its inbound e-mail. The software allows the e-mail to be classified under various categories for various brands — from Ragu spaghetti sauce to Mentadent toothpaste. Based on research such as the simple reading of e-mail, Unilever might realize that most Ragu consumers prefer the sauce in 28-ounce jars, not 16-ounce jars.

"We're trying to understand who the 20% of our consumers are who give us 80% of our business," Schroeder says. "EchoMail is helping us get to the point where we can customize our products."