

# Disarming pop-ups

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If you're annoyed by the pop-up windows that may appear while you're browsing Web pages on the Internet, you're not alone. In fact, pop-ups are so unpopular that the business of managing and blocking pop-up windows has emerged as another cottage industry in the computer world.

But pop-ups are more than annoying: They may also indicate that your computer has been infected with spyware. This article discusses some of the basics around pop-up windows and how to deal with blocking pop-ups themselves.

## What are pop-ups and why should I care?

Pop-up advertising windows evolved as a way of showing additional information about a Web page without taking you away from the original Web page entirely. Advertisers and others seized on this opportunity to sell or present special offers to Web users. According to Nielsen NetRatings, a Web advertising researcher, the use of pop-up advertising has tripled over the last two years.

At the same time, the use of pop-ups and other unsolicited advertising has also taken a darker turn. Some spyware now

can present pop-up solicitations – which are frequently of questionable or offensive nature – even after you've closed your Internet browser. Having this material appearing on your computer could be upsetting to your staff, and damaging to your reputation.

Intriguing legal implications have arisen from some of the pop-up advertisers, particular in the United States. In a recent case, a software company was ordered to shut down its advertising, which appeared in the form of pop-up messages. Ironically, the software being advertised was a pop-up blocker!

## Types of pop-ups

There are three basic types of pop-up windows:

1. *General browser pop-ups:* These can actually be useful and desirable. Many Web-based software applications rely on the use of pop-ups to present key instructions and information. Unfortunately, a great deal of Internet advertising is presented the same way.
2. *Windows Messenger Service pop-ups:* These often appear as grey banner ads with a "Messenger Service" line on

the title bar. While Windows Messenger Service has some applications in larger network environments, most users can and should disable this on their Windows 2000/XP/2003 computers.

3. *Spyware, adware, and other malware:* More recent and sophisticated pop-up advertising may be a symptom of having malicious software on your computer. These advertising pop-ups may offer offensive materials, and may even provide a means for unauthorized access to your computer and files.

## Blocking pop-ups

Different approaches work best for each of the three primary types of pop-ups.

### 1. BROWSER POP-UPS

A variety of free or modestly priced software is available for download to deal with the problem of pop-ups. For example, the "Google toolbar" (available at [toolbar.google.com](http://toolbar.google.com)) will prevent extra pop-up windows whenever you browse to a site. As well as being free and effective, the Google toolbar keeps count of the pop-ups it has blocked, and allows you to permit pop-up screens on a one-off basis simply by holding the <Ctrl> key when clicking on a link.

Other search engines such as Yahoo and MSN also offer similar free downloads. Microsoft has responded by updating Windows XP and Windows 2003, so they now offer pop-up blocking facilities as well. The next version of Internet Explorer is slated to include pop-up blocking; recent versions of most other popular browsers such as Netscape, Mozilla, and Opera already have this feature built in.

For Macintosh users, the "Safari" browser already has pop-up blocking built in. Internet service providers (ISPs) are also entering the fray, and offering built-in pop-up blocking with their portal software. A prime example is AOL, which offers pop-up blocking with its more recent releases of its browser.

**Tip:** Take care in selecting a free pop-up blocker download. In some cases, these have been reported to have contained spyware *themselves!*

More sophisticated software that offers pop-up blocking includes Pop-Up Stopper from [www.panicware.com](http://www.panicware.com) and PopUpCop from [www.popupcop.com](http://www.popupcop.com). These programs are reasonably priced, and offer more features that can be customized than the free downloads.

Some firewall software programs you may already have installed also offer pop-up blocking. For example, ZoneAlarm from [www.zonealarm.com](http://www.zonealarm.com) is a popular "personal firewall" product, and offers an effective means of blocking the pop-ups. <http://www.snapfiles.com/Freeware/misc/tools/fwpopblock.html> offers an excellent list and description of a variety of other pop-up blocking options.

**Tip:** Whichever option you choose, make sure that you still have control over whether or not pop-ups appear. As mentioned earlier, many Web sites have valid pop-ups built into the way they operate; you want to ensure that you have a means of getting at those pop-ups if you need them.

**Tip:** if you'd just prefer to deal with the pop-ups as they come, remember that pressing <Ctrl>+W on your keyboard will close the current browser or pop-up

window – even those that don't have a little "X" in the top corner.

## 2. SHUTTING DOWN WINDOWS MESSENGER SERVICE

This is something more of a technical exercise. If you're unsure about adjusting the settings of your computer, seek technical assistance before proceeding. Note that shutting off the messenger service is only the first step in making sure your computer is secure from these kinds of attacks. The following are the instructions for shutting down the messenger service, but it's important to implement a personal firewall as well. See <http://support.microsoft.com/?kbid=330904> for technical details.

- i) Click the Start button and choose Run;
- ii) Type services.msc into the text box and press Enter;
- iii) Locate and double-click on the Messenger item on the listing;
- iv) Select "Disabled" in the box that appears – this will prevent the service from starting when you reboot;
- v) Under service status, click the Stop button if the service is running.

This will disable the Windows Messenger Service, and stop many of the pop-ups that come through in this fashion.

**Tip:** don't let the similar terminology trick you: The "Windows Messenger Service" described here is not the same thing as Windows Messenger, Microsoft's instant messaging program.

## 3. SPYWARE POP-UPS

The subject of spyware and other malware could fill an entire issue of LAWPRO News. Simply put, spyware or malware is usually described as a file or program that tracks your computer activities without your knowledge.

The broader term of malware (or malicious software) refers to any file or program that intentionally works in a damaging way on your computer (thereby including things such as spyware, as well as computer worms and viruses, and, to bring us on point, browser pop-ups).

Fortunately, there are reasonably effective ways of eliminating spyware from your computer. The two leading software programs for dealing with this issue are:

- Spybot from [www.safer-networking.org/en/download/index.html](http://www.safer-networking.org/en/download/index.html); and
- Ad-Aware from [www.lavasoft.de](http://www.lavasoft.de).

Both are very well-respected products, and many people are actually using both at the same time, in an effort to pick up different types of spyware. If you do choose one of these applications, be sure to keep them up-to-date (much as you need to update anti-virus definitions regularly). In today's Internet, it's a best practice to use these or equivalent programs to maintain the security of your computers – in addition to keeping spyware pop-ups at bay.

Like most areas of technology, the use and abuse of pop-ups is in a state of constant change. With the release of new versions of Internet Explorer and Windows operating systems in recent months, traditional pop-up advertising has taken a blow. Taking the steps described will bring you up to date in the battle against pop-ups, but it remains to be seen what new forms of advertising will emerge in the future.

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