



User Phishing Awareness Survey

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Table of Contents

Introduction and Objectives	3
Methodology	4
Executive Summary	5
Conclusions and Analysis	5
Participant Comments	6
Survey Results	7
Survey Questions and Answers	8
Participant Demographics	9
About Ted Demopoulos and Demopoulos Associates	9



Introduction and Objectives:

The Internet, once a playground for mischievous hackers, has become a fertile breeding ground for serious crime. This includes identity theft, online extortion, credit card fraud, and more. Apprehending online criminals is difficult, and prosecuting them sometimes impossible: many reside in uncooperative foreign jurisdictions, and their actions may not even be considered criminal due to outdated local laws.

Criminals often attempt to spoof bank, auction, and other trusted websites, requesting personal information from users via emails and other electronic communications such as Instant Messages. These communications are known as phishing, and phishing has reached epidemic proportions. Many users receive phishing emails weekly or even daily. Some of these are extremely sophisticated and believable. Personal data captured is used for identity theft, credit card fraud, and other crimes.

Phishing has received widespread attention in the mainstream press, but how aware are average people of phishing threats? The objectives of this survey are straightforward: to determine how aware the average person is of phishing attacks, and to determine if the blight of phishing has changed user online behavior.



Methodology:

Ted Demopoulos surveyed 110 people between August 15 and September 30. Anyone known to work in IT was specifically excluded. This was because Ted Demopoulos comes into contact with a very high proportion of IT personnel.

Those surveyed included lawyers, secretaries, plumbers, telephone repairmen, telemarketers, doctors, and other people Ted encountered walking down the street – essentially a wide array of people.

Although the questions were very simple, the answers often had to be interpreted. For example, an answer of "sometimes" to the question "Do you use the Internet?" was interpreted as "yes." Similarly, if someone answered "yes" to "Have you heard of Phishing?" but was clearly confused (often by the similarity to the band named "Phish"), their answer was changed to "No."

If the answer to "Do you use the Internet?" was "no", then no additional questions were asked. Similarly, if someone hadn't heard of phishing, they were not asked additional questions.

The answers to "Can you tell me what phishing is?" were ranked very liberally. For example, a "good answer" didn't have to be perfect.

People were not asked their age - it was estimated. It became apparent that many of the estimates were inaccurate, as Ted Demopoulos clearly tended to estimate many 18-30 year olds and 50-65 year olds as close to his age, and put them in the 30-50 year old category. This doesn't affect the validity of the results. The only reason any age data was recorded was to guard against inadvertently skewing the survey towards any one age group.



Executive Summary:

A survey of 110 people conducted between August 15 and September 30, 2005 throughout the USA shows that only 48 percent of Internet users have heard of phishing, and only 30 percent have any idea of what it is. Less than four percent of Internet users have changed their online habits due to phishing threats.

These are appallingly low percentages since most Internet users have been targeted by phishing attacks!

Conclusions and Analysis:

Phishing constitutes a major Internet crime wave, yet less than one third of Internet users have any idea what phishing is, and less than four percent of Internet users have changed their Internet habits because of phishing. With an increasing amount of commerce online, this is especially worrisome.

The only way to combat phishing and other attacks that depend on influencing user behavior is increased user awareness. A user familiar with phishing is less likely to become a victim of phishing.

Many people commented that phishing is a ridiculous name, and we agree. Giving evolving criminal techniques cute names is not appropriate.

More analysis and discussion is available in the October issue of securITy, available at <http://www.demop.com/Newsletters/Oct05securITy.html>



Participant Comments:

- You mean I should worry about these? ”
- Changed my habits? hell no! ”
- You mean the band Phish? ”
- My credit cards are maxed out so it doesn't matter. ”
- I have several phishing attacks weekly. ”
- Phishing? That's a stupid name. ”
- I don't even open email unless I know the sender. ”
- I read about them last week but don't remember. ”
- I just got one this morning. ”



Survey Results:

91 percent of those surveyed use the Internet.

Of those Internet users, 48 percent have heard of phishing, although only 30 percent have any idea of what phishing is.

Of those who have heard of phishing, 29 percent have no idea what it is, 8 percent gave an entirely incorrect answer, 17 percent gave an at least partially correct answer, and 46 percent gave an adequate answer.

Eight percent of Internet users who have heard of phishing have changed their online habits because of it.

Of all Internet users, only thirty percent have any idea of what phishing is.

Of all Internet users, only 3.5 percent have changed their habits because of phishing.

Survey Questions and Answers:

1) **Do you use the Internet?**

Yes: 100

No: 10

2) **Have you heard of "Phishing?" Phishing spelled with a "p h."**
(only asked of Internet users)

Yes: 48

No: 52

3) **Can you tell me what phishing is?**

(only asked of those who have heard of phishing)

No: 14

Incorrect answer: 4

Partially correct answer: 8

Good answer: 22

4) **Has the threat of "Phishing" changed your online habits at all?**

(only asked of those who have heard of phishing)

Yes: 4

No: 44



Participant Demographics:

Male: 51

Female: 59

Estimated Age Breakdown:

10-18: 6

18-30: 20

30-50: 44

50-65: 18

65+: 22

About Ted Demopoulos and Demopoulos Associates

Ted Demopoulos is a speaker, author, and consultant, who is passionate about technology, business, and especially their intersection.

Security, which Ted defines as "keeping your business robust and reliable," is a core competency of Ted and Demopoulos Associates. More information about Demopoulos Associates is available at demop.com and Ted blogs at TheTedRap.com.