

White Powder Mailings a Wake-Up Call

Mail security expert sees likelihood of increase in mail based attack

By Phil Leggiere
January 23, 2009

Amid all the hoopla surrounding the inauguration the news Wednesday involving the delivery of suspicious white powder to the offices of *The Wall St. Journal* in New York City was perhaps understandably overlooked.

Though tests seem to have established that these particular mailings contained only harmless flour-like substances, the [incident](#) should neither be dismissed as “minor” nor isolated, Keith James, Program director of Mail Security Systems at SoBran Inc., one of the nation’s top security consultants with a clientele of Fortune 500 firms and government agencies, told *HSToday.us*.

Instead, James said, the incident should serve as a wake-up call.

“When a high profile event of this sort hits the media it may get people’s attention for 24 hours and then it’s gone,” said James. “In fact hundreds of incidents of this kind occur every year and the probability is high we’ll see more not less,” he said, referring in particular to mail attacks on the Church of Latter Day Saints in Salt Lake City in November and against numerous banks and other financial institutions in the wake of the financial bail-outs last fall.

The advent of a new presidential administration, according to James, will likely be the catalyst for further attacks in the coming months. “Whenever you have new policies you’re going to have people, individuals or groups, that are angry about them,” he explained. “Whenever you have a new leadership, you’ll have many who are inspired, but also some who see the new leadership as an enemy,” he added.

The lack of barriers to entry make mail based attacks all too tempting, according to James. “It’s incredibly easy for any angry group or individual to get everything they need to launch a deadly attack based on a hour’s research online and \$12 at the Home Depot in their hometown,” he said. “You don’t need a sophisticated organization and Phd scientists.”

What's critical, according to James, is that we avoid the two, ostensibly polar opposite but in reality related pitfalls of emergency preparedness, panic and complacency.

"The first two or three times potentially dangerous materials get delivered everybody panics," James said. "Then after a while when it turns out to be baby powder nobody takes it seriously anymore. They just assume it's not really a threat. That's when you leave yourself open to a real surprise attack, and it's that level of complacency that the really serious and sophisticated attackers hope to cultivate."

The paradox of mail security, James explained, is that the more false attacks that are launched, the more "hoaxes", the more dangerous the likelihood of a real attack getting through.

The only solution, James insists, is sustained and organized vigilance on the part of businesses and organizations.

"It's imperative," James said, "that every business of every size have security systems in place, not just as safety plans up on the shelf, but as a regular part of operations, to have a detailed response and communication plan that everyone in the organization from CEO to the secretary on the 75th floor, is fully aware of."

Such a plan, he said, should detail how each individual should respond, communicate and behave in the event a suspicious package is discovered, and also include a well thought out evacuation plan.

Beyond the safety plan, organizations further need to learn how to better anticipate threats.

"If you're the mailroom or facility manager of a building that houses a business or organization that's in the news and is the subject of threats, not only police or federal agencies, but that facility manager needs to be basing their activities on that intelligence," he said.

Other ideas that need to be taken more seriously by the private sector are investment in mail screening technologies, and, for large organizations, having mail screened remotely by third-party services in a manner to that now employed by the Department of Homeland Security for all of its incoming mail. This cost needn't be borne by a single company, James suggested. Rather business organizations and associations in a region could collaborate to pool resources to pay for such a service.

Too many Americans, including American business leaders and politicians, James said, falsely assume that the threat of anthrax or other biotoxin or chemical attacks, disappeared with the death of anthrax suspect Bruce Ivins last August. Nothing, he warned, could be less true.

"We're not a country with a long memory," he said. "But when it comes to something like a biological or hazardous chemical attack through the mail the thing we need as a society to wrap our minds around is that the threat is here to stay."

