Markets for Attention:
Will Postage for Email Help?

ABSTRACT
Balancing the needs of information distributors and their audiences has grown harder in the age of the Internet. While the demand for attention continues to increase rapidly with the volume of information and communication, the supply of human attention is relatively fixed. Markets are a social institution for efficiently balancing supply and demand of scarce resources. Charging a price for sending messages may help discipline senders from demanding more attention than they are willing to pay for. Price may also help recipients estimate the value of a message before reading it. We report the results of two laboratory experiments to explore the consequences of a pricing system for electronic mail. Charging postage for email causes senders to be more selective and send fewer messages. However, recipients did not use the postage paid by senders as a signal of importance. These studies suggest markets for attention have potential, but their design needs more work.

Keywords
Computer mediated communication, electronic mail, empirical studies, economics, markets, social impact, spam.

JEL Codes: D40, L86, L96, M21