

BSD HACKS

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Dru Lavigne

HACK
#98

Rotate Your Signature

End your email communications with a short witticism.

We all seem to know at least one geek friend or mailing-list poster whose emails always end with a different and humorous bit of random nonsense. You may be aware that this is the work of her `~/.signature` file, but have you ever wondered how she manages to rotate those signatures?

While there are several utilities in the ports collection that will randomize your signature, it is easy enough to roll your own signature rotator using the `fortune` program and a few lines of shell scripting.

If Your Mail Program Supports a Pipe

Your approach will vary slightly, depending on whether your particular mail user agent (MUA) supports pipes. If it does, it's capable of interpreting the contents of a file as command output, just like when you use a pipe (`|`) on the command line.

I use `pine`, which supports both static signature files and signatures that come from the piped output of a signature rotation program.

When configuring `pine`, choose Setup from the main menu, then C for the configuration editor. Find the `signature-file` option and give it this value:

```
.signature |
```

The pipe character tells `pine` to process that filename as a program instead of inserting its contents literally.

Also enable the `signature-at-bottom` option found in the Reply Preferences to ensure your signature is placed at the bottom of your emails, even when replying to an email.

Next, create a file called `~/.signature` containing these lines:

```
echo "Your random fortune:"  
/usr/games/fortune -s
```

This isn't quite a shell script: I don't have to include the `#!/bin/sh` line or use `chmod +x` to set the file as executable. However, `pine` will execute those two lines whenever I compose or reply to an email, adding something like this to the bottom of the email:

```
Your random fortune:  
"Right now I'm having amnesia and deja vu at the same time."  
-- Steven Wright
```

Rotate Your Signature

I also included the short switch (-s) to fortune, as it's bad Netiquette to end an email with a long signature.

If you try a few test messages, you'll see that every email receives a different, random signature.

Depending upon your audience, you may wish to filter further the fortunes to use as signatures. You'll find the available fortunes in `/usr/share/games/fortune`. If your friends are Trekkies, modify the fortune line in your `~/.signature` like so:

```
/usr/games/fortune -s startrek
```

If they tend to be cynical, try `murphy` instead.

Pipeless Signature Rotation

Some MUAs, such as Mozilla's mailer, don't support pipes. You'll know yours doesn't if your test message produces no fortune. Fortunately, there's another option.

Create a file as before, but this time make it a Bourne script. I'll save mine in `~/bin` and make it executable using `chmod +x`:

```
#!/bin/sh
echo "Your random fortune:" > $HOME/.signature
/usr/games/fortune -s >> $HOME/.signature
```

This script does two things. It echoes the first line to the `~/.signature` file, then appends the results of the fortune program to the same file.

To configure Mozilla to use this signature file, open the Mail & Newsgroups window, and choose Mail & Newsgroups Account Settings from the Edit menu. Select the "Attach this signature" option from the main menu, and use the Choose button to give the location of `~/.signature`.

What do you think will happen when I compose an email? Since Mozilla only understands literal signature files, it will faithfully reproduce the current contents of `~/.signature`. If I haven't run my script yet, that file doesn't exist. If I have run the script, the resulting file remains the same until the script runs again.

This is different from `pine`, which has the capability of executing the commands found in my signature file. Since Mozilla can't, you'll have to remember to run the script manually before you compose an email or schedule its periodic execution using `cron`. This may be a little disappointing if you want every recipient to receive a unique signature, or not a big deal if you send only one or two emails a day and aren't a stickler for randomness.

Hacking the Hack

Hmm, what would happen if *.signature* were a named pipe connected to a program that provided a random signature on every read? There are many possibilities here.

See Also

- `man fortune`