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Why Does Outgoing Mail Fail When Using a WiFi Connection?

Actually this applies anytime the connection is not made using the normal dial-up, cable or DSL connection.

First Some Background:

A normal connection to a mail server is through a dial-up, cable or DSL connection. What this really means is that you connect to your service providers "private" network. It is only available to their customers using the logon established at sign-up. Using this private network connection you connect to the email server where you email client, such as Outlook Express, picks up incoming and sends outgoing mail. When you connect in any other way, for example through a WiFi hotspot, you are connecting to your providers email server through the public network, the internet. That changes everything.

Now Some History:

In the early days of the internet, email servers didn't care how you connected. If your email client could logon to the server and attempt to send mail, the email server dutifully accepted the mail and sent it on. Then spam came along. Spammers found that they could hide the origin of their junk mail by forcing mail to go through a hundred mail servers before getting to the destination. This worked because the servers were configured as "open relays". Soon mail servers were kept so busy handling all the spam mail that legitimate mail wouldn't get through. Soooooo, email server software was modified so that it would not accept outbound mail though a connection from the internet (public network). The open relay was shut down. If you want to use the new email servers for outbound mail, you must now connect only through the private network.

An Example:

My laptop normally connects from the office through a DSL connection to SBCGlobal.net. The outbound mail goes to smtp.sbcglobal.net. But when I connect at Joe's truck stop using wireless networking, I connect through Joe's cable modem in the domain mycable.net. Now if I try to send mail using (say) Outlook Express, the connection to smtp.sbcglobal.net is made though the internet (public network) not sbcglobal's private network. The outbound mail will be rejected.

The Fix:

The easiest way to deal with this is to use the web based interface to the mail server. That's a fancy way of saying, use Internet Explorer or Netscape or whatever browser to logon to the mail server's web page. You can usually get there by entering <http://mail.yourdomain.com> in the address field of your browser. Yourdomain of course is replaced with the actual domain name. In the example above that would be sbcglobal.net. There is usually a link to the mail service on the providers main web page.

Using the web page you can read your mail and create and send outbound mail. You can even use attachments and get receipts.

Another way to fix the problem is to add an account to your email client that uses the outbound mail server of the domain you are currently connecting from. In the example above you would add an email account and specify the outbound server smtp.mycable.net. (SMTP is the protocol used for sending mail. Most outbound servers are named smtp.theirdomain.com or whatever.) This solution works well if you visit the same WiFi spot often. You need to get the correct information on the outbound server to configure it. The operator of the hotspot may or may not allow that kind of connection. After all, he/she doesn't want to have a spammer using their mail server. In addition you may have to logon to the mail server, which means that you would have to have an account in that domain. That is usually no practical.

See the document on adding an account to Outlook Express for details on adding a new account.

Additional Notes:

Free mail accounts such as those offered by Yahoo.com and Hotmail will typically only work using a browser (web) interface. They cannot be used with an email client such as Outlook Express. On the other hand they are accessible from anywhere.

It is generally not a good idea to pick up mail from the same server on two different computers. Problems arise when you pick up your mail on machine A on Tuesday, then when working on machine B on Wednesday you want to refer to the mail you picked up on Tuesday. It won't be available because Tuesday's messages are on machine A, which is miles away. If you must read mail from two locations or machines use the web interface on one or both machines. Another solution is to configure one machines email client to "leave a copy on the server."