The Last Word: Those Third-Class, Junk Mail Blues

William Murphy
Bridgewater State College
Recently I traveled with my wife and daughter to Italy to explore its architectural and artistic treasures. While in Rome we were naturally fascinated by the Pantheon, Coliseum and Via Sacra, but I seemed to be more interested in how the present day institutions worked. What about the transportation systems, the flow of traffic, the commerce and public safety? And, of course, there was the infamous Italian Postal Service with its international reputation for inefficiency and waste. Someone suggested we avoid it by using the Vatican Post Office. It seemed an especially good idea after we heard, from several sources, that a few years ago a postal worker had dealt with a huge backlog of undelivered letters and packages by heaving the load in a dumpster.

Perhaps this person’s behavior was justifiable given what I observed to be overwhelming circumstances, namely, an entire institution gone haywire. Our tendency to laugh at this singular example of Italian bureaucratic inefficiency was based on our sense of superiority. By comparison, the American Postal Service seems a model of efficiency. The Italians may have the longevity, but we get the job done much better. At least that was my smug view until we got home.

I had sent my son a postcard of the Coliseum with a beautiful Vatican stamp on it and expected to see it stuck to the refrigerator when we got in the door. However, in response to my inquiry about the card my son set before me two shopping bags filled with junk mail. He said that the card might be “lost in this stuff.” This was, you understand, TWELVE POUNDS of mail that had accumulated over a period of just two weeks. And it didn’t include a single piece of first class mail.

So began the search for the lost post card, and searching the front “non-transferable cash voucher enclosed,” or an offer for a portfolio of breathtaking photographs by Ansel Adams. Do I want wildlife stamps? More memberships? Free trees? I was beginning to feel like a victim, frustrated, angry, ready to tear stuff up. And no postcard. I decided to do something.

I called the post office to insist that deliveries to my house no longer include third class items. I was told that the post office was in the business of making money and that delivering third class mail was lucrative for the postal service. Therefore the junk mail delivered to homes like mine would be against the interests of the postal service, and of course the United States. In a sense opposing junk mail is un-American.

However, I was given the name of a firm that could have my address removed from those mailing lists that make the mass mailing industry what it is today. If all works out they will bring my junk mail blues to an end. I was promised that my name would be removed from mailing lists of catalogs, charities, religious organizations and sweepstakes. I was assured that in approximately three months I would notice a decrease in mail volume. No longer was my name and address to be sold. I would be free of the pleas from Ed McMahon, the Smithsonian Institution, the Cousteau Society, St. Labre Indian School and many others who buy access to mailing lists. Good-bye to discount coupons, catalogs, free samples of detergents and offers of books, records and tapes. No longer will those Coliseum postcards remain lost in piles of third class mail, assuming, of course, that they aren’t first thrown out in the name of efficiency in Rome.

WILLIAM MURPHY
Professor of Special Education