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**Pushing the Envelope**

**By Joel Stein**

I love everything about the postal system. I love that it's the only service industry left in which I don't have to tip anyone. I love that my mail carrier knows a lot of disturbing things about me on the basis of my mail and never says anything about them. I love that every day, I get to see my name in print. As much as I like e-mail, physical mail is more exciting. It's e-mail you can injure yourself opening.

Which is why I'm panicked that the U.S. Postal Service—which has been around since 1775 and has been completely self-funded since 1971—has declared that it will likely go bankrupt in a year, after losing about $10 billion this year. "Congressional action is needed immediately to avoid this default," said Postmaster General Patrick Donahoe at a Senate hearing in September. Nobody likes to see someone with the title Postmaster General beg for money.

The USPS faces two big problems that few people understand: a federal mandate to prefund retirement benefits for its 571,566 full-time employees and the fact that no one sends mail anymore. I tried to think of the past 10 letters I sent, and I'm pretty sure seven of them were thank-you notes from my bar mitzvah[[1]](#footnote-1).

Part of the issue is that mail—like many things I will not list here because my editors will delete them—is something I like getting but not giving. For me to mail something, I'd have to figure out how to get a stamp, then remember to put the envelope in my car and then, days later, figure out why this envelope is in my car. And I'd have to remember how to write with a pen.

So the post office is in danger of going under. UPS and FedEx, with tougher union deals and no obligation to deliver to the bottom of the Grand Canyon, control 85% of express-mail and package delivery. People are reading magazines on iPads and sharing pictures of their kids on Facebook, and companies are starting to charge for sending bills by mail. The post office has become a government-run spam-delivery system propped up by the Victoria's Secret catalog, which is America's last publication with daily morning and afternoon editions.

Maybe the post office will get out of this disaster with another one of its great innovative ideas, like informing Americans of its services by sponsoring teams at European bicycle races. But I fear we could lose our postal service as we know it. And I could risk losing my Victoria's Secret catalogs. So I've been working on a radical six-point plan.

**Make better stamps.** This year the USPS released stamps with portraits of Pixar characters, Selena and Mark Twain. Do you think that's what stamp collectors are into? Stamp collectors are into eating TV dinners alone and crying. Put out a stamp series of famous people eating TV dinners alone and crying, and there's your $10 billion.

**Charge $2 per stamp.** Offering someone 44¢ to drive across the country in three days and deliver a letter to an apartment in the most remote part of Montana sounds like the worst sequel to The Cannonball Run[[2]](#footnote-2) ever pitched. I propose turning the postal system into a small, classy wedding-invite, thank-you-note and holiday-card service--the new telegram. It would involve sexy but tasteful uniforms.

**Charge people to get mail.** All great businesses charge the giver and the receiver: text-messaging, strip clubs, Herbalife. Amazingly, the post office used to do this, but it stopped in 1896 because it was making so much money.

**Improve public relations.** We need a glamorous, critically acclaimed, moody drama series about 1960s postal workers to undo the damage Cliff Clavin from Cheers and Newman from Seinfeld[[3]](#footnote-3) did to the brand. In Not-So-Mad Men, the dashing mail carrier would sleep with housewives on his delivery route and be tough--though not going-postal tough.

**Stop delivering on Saturdays.** That was just showing off.

**Shut down the post offices.** Everyone loves the sunny mail carrier; everyone hates the surly person behind the post-office window, whose job requires far more human interaction. And you can't just switch them, since what's making the carriers sunny is the joy of being outdoors and driving with the steering wheel on the wrong side. So we've got to close the post offices. The USPS is actually doing this--possibly shutting 12% of its 31,871 branches. But it's hoping to move many of the remaining ones into convenience stores and pharmacies, which are maybe the only places more depressing than post offices. I say we move them into Trader Joe's and Apple stores.

But these are long-range, forward-looking plans. Our friends at the post office need revenue now. So please cut out or print this column and mail it back to me: Joel Stein, TIME, 1271 Avenue of the Americas, New York, NY 10020. That stamp is cheap compared with what you're going to have to send for my next column, on how to save Social Security.

1. The ritual that marks the 13th birthday of a Jewish boy. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. A 1981 comedy film concerning a cross-country race. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. 1980s/90s television comedies in which characters playing U.S. Postal workers were unfavorably portrayed. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)