

Post cards: the Work Horse of Direct Mail Marketing

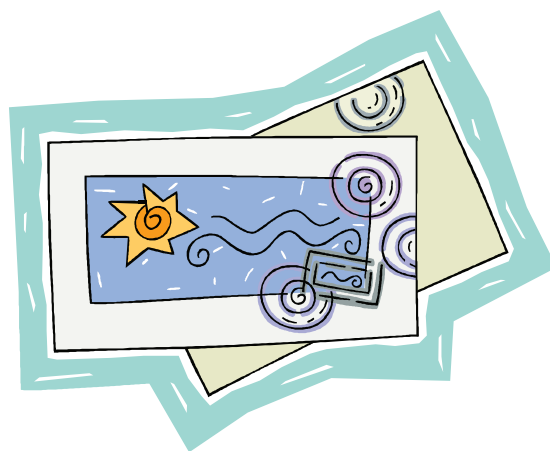
A post card is one of the most versatile, inexpensive, and effective tools you can have in your marketing tool kit. Compared to the effort and cost of a brochure or a traditional direct mail package mailed in an envelope, a post card is quick, easy, and a great way to stretch your marketing budget. In addition, some kinds of post cards will help you keep your mailing list updated.

What is a post card?

Think of a post card as a miniature billboard – a design space that can hold

- a photograph of a new product, a staff member, or your location
- a handwritten message to customers
- a published article
- a reminder of an upcoming event
- a request for an appointment
- a mini newsletter
- a discount coupon or admission ticket
- a newsworthy happening in your company

The advantage of a post card is that it does not have to be opened to be read and if creatively designed, can have impact far beyond its size and cost.



Post card sizes

Perhaps when you think of a post card, you think of two sizes: 4 1/4 x 5 1/2 inches (one-quarter of an 8 1/2 x 11 sheet of paper) or 5 1/2 x 8 1/2 inches (one-half of an 8 1/2 x 11 sheet of paper). These two sizes are common and popular, in part because they fit on a standard letter-sized sheet of paper.

To the United States Postal Service (USPS), a post card is a *self mailer* – something that is not in an envelope. A self mailer can be either a single ply like a post card, or can be folded over like a brochure or an invitation. It can also be a wide variety of sizes – from 3 1/2 x 5 inches to 6 1/8 to 11 1/2 inches.

Postage for post cards

Depending on its size and shape and the quantity being mailed, the postage for a post card could be any of four rates: first class, first class presort, standard presort, or card. First class and first

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class are the highest postage rates, followed by standard presort. The card rate is the least expensive postage rate.

The card postage rate

The card rate is worth understanding. It is a subclass of first class mail, which gives the mail piece delivery priority over standard mail. (*Standard mail* is the term adopted by the USPS in 1996 to replace the term *third class mail*.) In addition, like all first class mail, the card rate comes with address services – the USPS term for letting the mailer know when a mail piece can't be delivered as addressed.

Here's how these three things – lowest postage rate, delivery priority, and address services – can be used to advantage. Let's say you are planning to mail a very expensive mail piece – a large catalog, or a sophisticated traditional direct mail package. If you do a “pre-mailing” of a post card at the USPS card rate, you will be able to update your mailing list and minimize the amount of undeliverable catalogs or letters for the expensive mailing. By sending post cards at the card rate 4-6 weeks prior, you will receive returns and can make the address changes and deletions. With a clean mailing list, you will gain greater confidence that even standard mail will be delivered as addressed. Also, if correctly worded, the post card can serve as a teaser or suspense builder to set up the main mailing.

Qualifying for the card postage rate

To qualify for the card postage rate, the post card must be a minimum of 3 1/2 x 5 inches and a maximum of 4 1/4 x 6 inches single ply, and meet the USPS *aspect ratio* (the relationship between the height and length). It must also be a minimum thickness of 0.007 (7 points in paper caliper measurements). If there are at least 500 pieces in the mailing, the post cards can be presorted to gain a postage discount, and if the post cards are addressed with a delivery point bar code there is an additional postage discount for automation-compatibility with USPS mail processing equipment.

One important thing to keep in mind about the card rate – the popular post card size of 4 1/4 x 5 1/2 does not meet the aspect ratio requirements for automation-compatible postage discounts. If you would like to have this discount and also the economy of getting four post cards from a standard letter-sized sheet of paper, then size the post card at 4 x 5 inches or 4 1/8 x 5 1/2 inches, both of which meet the aspect ratio requirements.

Using oversized post cards

Sometimes getting the lowest possible postage rate is not the marketing objective. When you want an eye-catching post card, consider an over-sized or super-sized version.

As we mentioned earlier, a popular post card size is 5 1/2 x 8 1/2 inches – half of a sheet of letter-sized paper. This size offers advantages in printing, since it is a clean cut with no waste out of an 8 1/2 x 11 sheet. For example, if you want to take delivery of 1000 post cards, it will take a press run of only 500 sheets to produce a yield of 1000.

On the other hand, it is such a popular size that many post cards in a batch of mail may be this size. To be more eye-catching to the reader going through a batch of mail, consider some alternative sizes. For instance, we like 6 x 9 inches – this size is half an inch higher and wider than the popular 5 1/2 x 8 1/2 inch post card and so will “stick out” in a stack of mail. Even more compelling is a “super size” post card measuring a full 6 1/8 x 11 1/2 inches. And because the USPS considers any size between 4 1/4 x 6 and 6 1/8 x 11 1/2 inches to be letter-sized mail, all three sizes of post cards – popular, oversized and super-sized – mail at the same postage rate. Do remember that you will have to use a stock with a higher base weight to satisfy the USPS standards for thickness, stiffness and tear strength.

Using post cards for personalized direct mail

One-to-one marketing – personalizing a mail piece with specific information about the recipient – is much more feasible technically with post cards than with a traditional direct mail marketing package. Particularly if the personal information appears on the same size of the post card as the address, it can be more economical than you may think to take advantage of this proven marketing technique.

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We hope you have some new ideas about how to use post cards to make your direct mail marketing more effective. We would be glad to help you plan a series of post cards that will accomplish your marketing objectives while fitting within your budget for printing, mailing and postage.



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