

Do-it-yourself: Stop junk mail, email and phone calls

A free guide to reducing unwanted or intrusive advertising

Junk mail may seem as inevitable as death and taxes, but with a little patience there are effective ways to tackle the problem. This guide provides clear, simple and proven reduction techniques. About 20 minutes investment now will clear the junk for between two and five years.



General Techniques

Your name, address, and buying habits are a commodity that is regularly sold & traded on the open market. These days organizations you deal with virtually all sell your name unless you specifically ask them to stop. Here are some general techniques:

- Whenever you donate money, order a product or service, or fill out a warranty card, write in large letters, "Please do not sell my name or address". Most organizations will properly mark your name in the computer.
- Product warranty cards are often used to collection information on your habits and income, for the sole purpose of targeting direct mail. They are not required in most situations - avoid sending them.
- On the telephone, ask "Please mark my account so that my name is not traded or sold to other companies".
- Your credit card company probably sells your name the most often -- keep reading for techniques to stop it.
- "Contests" where you fill in a little entry blank are almost always fishing expeditions for names. If you fill one out at a football game, for example, expect to get a catalog of football merchandise within a few months. Avoid these if you don't want the mail.
- Select a **false middle name or initial** for each charity or business you deal with. Keep track of which letter goes with which organization. You can also select a false road designator, "avenue, place, circle, street, highway, parkway, etc.". This step can be very revealing. Some guides recommend changing the spelling of your name, but this can lead to duplicate mailings.

To stop specific types of unwanted paper mail

The amount of paper junk mail sent each year in the USA is staggering -- some 4 million tons, nearly half of which is never opened. Even if you recycle there are still enormous environmental costs in terms of ink, energy to produce deliver and recycle the paper, recycling inefficiencies and loss of productive forest to create the high quality glossy paper much junk mail uses. The industry tries to "greenwash" themselves, but you probably won't be fooled. Badly targeted junk mail helps nobody, but the industry likes to keep pumping it out.

There is a lot you can do to reduce the cost to the environment and your own time:

- **First class mail:** Cross out the address and bar code, circle the first class postage and write "refused: return to sender". Drop in any mail box, it will be returned to the sender.
- **Bulk mail:** The post office throws away bulk mail it can't deliver, so *returning it does no good*. Bulk mail is the hardest to deal with because the USPS actively provides addresses, support, and encouragement to mailers. However, if "address correction requested" is written on the label: circle "address correction requested" and treat like first class mail.
- **Sexually Oriented Advertising (SOA):** The only help you'll get from the Post Office in controlling junk mail is for explicit stuff. Fill out USPS forms 1500 if you wish this type of mail to stop. You define what you find to be explicit -- if that's an automobile parts catalog the post office won't disagree with you.
- **Credit offers:** The major credit agencies all sell aggregate credit information any bidder. Direct mail and credit companies generate mail based on demographics including zip code, income band and credit payment patterns. Stopping this is easy; you just need your address, former address within two years, and social security number. One call does it all for agencies Equifax, Trans Union, Experian and Innovis. Dial **1-888-5 OPT OUT** (or 1-888-567-8688) 24 hours a day.
- **Catalogs:**
 - Call the company's 800 number and have the label handy.
 - Write your instructions on the mailing label and fax it to the company. Mark "ATTN: customer service".
 - Tear off the label, write your instructions on it, and enclose in the postage-paid ordering envelope. Mark envelope "ATTN: customer service". This method is the least effective.
- **AOL (America On-Line):** You could pave the nation with the free discs these people send out, call **1-800-605-4297** (24 hours a day) to get off the list. Tell them your first name is "current", last name "resident".
- **Publisher's Clearinghouse Sweepstakes:** You can get the Clearinghouse to stop clogging your mailbox by

contacting customer service at **1-800-645-9242** (8:30 am to 8:30 EST), sending a fax to **1-800-453-0272**, mailing to *101 Channel Drive, Port Washington, NY 11050*, or you can send email to pch@ant.net. PCH will remove any number of names from a specific address, but you have to list each name exactly and insist nicely.

- **American Family Sweepstakes:** Dick Clark will stop telling you "You have definitely won 11 million dollars (maybe)" if you call them at **1-800-237-2400**. AFP is a division of Time-Warner.
- **Local business & supermarket fliers:** All mailings must be identified, by postal regulations. Each loose-leaf bundle of fliers, by postal regulations, must be delivered at the same time as an address card. Locate this address card; the cards usually have an advertisement and a photograph of a missing child. You may need to call directory assistance to get the phone number of the sender. Specific senders are:
 - **ADVO** (Mail comes with pictures of missing children). Call **1-860-285-6100** to get off the list. You may have to send a postcard to "ADVO Consumer Assistance, POB 249, Windsor CT 06095-4176".
 - **Val-Pak Coupons:** click the link and copy your mailing label.
 - **Carol Wright** Call **1-800-67-TARGET** to get off the list.

Most senders are professional companies which will handle your request politely. "ADVO Mailbox Values" and "Harte Hanks Potpourri" are the most common of these mailers. Your local supermarket's monthly coupon books may be handled by these companies, so be sure to specify if you want to continue to receive those. Your letter carrier is accustomed to giving each house a bundle, so you may also need to inform him or her of your action separately. The post office is prohibited by law from delivering unaddressed mail, so you should have little trouble convincing the carrier.

- **Too much junk to deal with individually:** Start by sending a postcard or letter to *Mail Preference Service, Direct Marketing Association, PO Box 643, Carmel, NY 15012-0643* Include your complete name, address, zip code and a request to "activate the preference service". For up to five years, this will stop mail from all member organizations that you have not specifically ordered products from.

The Direct Marketing Association estimates that listing with their mail preference service will stop 75% of all national mailings. They process 50,000 requests a month and requests are kept active for five years. If you fill out the post office change of address form, the DMA will track the new address (you'll get a few months of mailings to the new address before they catch up to you). It can take up to six months for your request to be fully processed. You can also opt-out online, but they charge \$5. The best way is to fill out their online form, then mail them a printout.

To stop mail addressed to former residents, or a former spouse

If you rent you are probably familiar with receiving mail for a dozen or more former residents of your dwelling. Since you probably don't want any of the stuff, you can use two powerful techniques that might not be appropriate for yourself:

- **Bulk mail for "current resident or ...":** Start with sending a postcard or letter to *Mail Preference Service, Direct Marketing Association, PO Box 643, Carmel, NY 15012-0643* Write "please activate the mail preference service", and include the name, address, and zip code. You must send individual postcards -- the DMA wants to make this all as inconvenient as possible. The DMA will ignore requests that don't appear to be from a single individual.
- **First class and some bulk mail:** If the former residents neglected to fill out a Post Office change of address card, or it expired, you can fill one out for them. You must fill out one card for each unique last name. Write "Moved, Left No Forwarding Address" as the new address. Sign your own name and write "Form filled in by current resident of the house, [Your Name], agent for the above". You must write "agent for the above". Hand this form directly to your carrier, if possible, as your carrier must approve the form and see that it gets entered into the post service National Change of Address (NCOA) database. This is *very effective*.

More ideas on dealing with paper junk mail

For more ideas, link to CSPR's "[How to Get Less Junk Mail](#)". For very good information about mail/email sent with fraudulent intent (money making schemes, multi-level marketing, fly-by-night operators, stock market "secrets", etc.), link to the National Fraud Information Center.

Expect mail from environmentally sensitive organizations to use recycled paper, preferably "unbleached" grey or tan-colored paper with a high post-consumer content. Glassine windows (the "waxed paper" look), or no windows, are preferred. In areas that accept mixed paper, most junk mail can be recycled. Remove any plastic wrap, stickers, product samples, and those pointless "membership" cards. Due to new technology, plastic window envelopes and staples are ok in many communities. Even though junk mail can often be recycled, recycling is second best to reducing need¹. Much junk mail uses virgin paper, often of types with poor recycling value and toxic inks. Recycling itself takes energy and resources and has its own impacts on the environment. Reduction, where possible, is the far better choice.