

An Open Letter to John E. Potter, Postmaster General

February 12, 2007

Dear Postmaster Potter:

I am writing to ask if you would please consider redecorating my local post office. Maybe you have heard of it: 11215. It's the Park Slope Station in Brooklyn, New York, and I believe that a great many novelists spend time there, waiting to mail their manuscripts and galleys and quarterly estimated tax payments and whatnot, so perhaps it is the source of a great many written complaints. Or perhaps not. Anyway, may I elaborate on the nature of the problem?

The nature of the problem is choice of font. For example, among the dozens of signs at the Park Slope Station, there is one that announces:

No pets, bikes, skates, food or drink.

This appears in red lettering on a white plastic placard. The word "no" is printed in the same font as the other words, only larger; it consumes as much vertical space as "pets," "bikes," and "skates" (that notorious trio) put together. It's a fine placard, but not so far away from it is another placard, also featuring red lettering on a white plastic background, advising:

We test for counterfeit bills.

These words appear in an entirely different font family than was used in the first sign. Also, rather than using size to add emphasis, in this sign the emphasized word, "counterfeit," appears in negative: white lettering on a red background. Taped up between these two red-on-white, plastic placards is a black-on-white, paper sign that reads (in all caps):

NO DUCT, MASKING, ELECTRICAL
OR SURGICAL TAPE.

ONLY CLEAR OR BROWN
MAILING TAPE.
ALL BOXES MUST BE CLEAR
OF ADVERTISEMENT.

This sign was printed out on a laser printer during the last, foggy hours in the life of a toner cartridge, so there are several places where a horizon of mist interrupts the lettering. What's more, the words are printed in a third, and hitherto unprecedented, font.

The uses of bold, italics, underlining and capitalization are also, at best, higgledy-piggledy. For example contrast this:

Attention Retail Customers

Our sales associates *are required to ask* the following question before accepting your parcels for mailing:

*“Does this parcel contain anything ...
Fragile, Liquid, Perishable, or Potentially
Hazardous?”*

This question must be asked to ensure¹ safe transportation of all items that will be carried on commercial aircraft.

Thanks for your understanding.
Customer Sales Manager.

With this:

Ship With Confidence.
Choose Priority Mail® with INSURANCE² and
SIGNATURE CONFIRMATION.

And this:

*Please raise and lower the window **Slowly.***

The last of these signs appears eight times in the Park Slope Station, twice at each of the four registers where the postal employees sit. It is necessary because the station is outfitted with a double wall of bomb-proof Plexiglas that separates the customers from

¹ See footnote 2.

² I applaud that you distinguish between “ensure” and “insure.”

the employees. In order for a customer to hand a package over for weighing and posting, the customer must first raise (*Slowly*) a window in the outer Plexiglas wall, then place the package into the air lock between the two walls, and then lower (*Slowly*) the window, after which a spring contraption releases a window in the inner Plexiglas wall, allowing the employee to take the package. (This system of double Plexiglas walls indeed would seem to provide excellent protection to any customer who built, and then handed to a postal employee, a time-delayed bomb.) Which brings us to this sign:

Notice: This office can not accept
any large parcel unable to
fit through this window.
If this situation should arise,
please use:

Van Brunt Station
275 9th Street
Brooklyn NY 11215

The sentences that follow the first colon are all left justified left, but the address that follows the second colon appears in a text box that is right justified, and the address is centered within this box. I am realizing that the problems with my local postal station go beyond font. Allow me to enumerate:

(1) *Poor use of fonts.* See above.

(2) *Poor use of text justification.* See above.

(3) *Lack of a unified scheme for posting information, physically, on the walls.*

The plastic placards are affixed to the walls with glue or with screws; the posters are framed and hung by nails; the single sheets of 8 ½ by 11 paper are stuck up with tape.

This is needless, because the entire southerly wall of the station is outfitted with a dozen horizontal aluminum runners, the kind that allow you to hang and re-hang objects of all sizes, without damaging the walls. There are a number of signs hung from these runners (including one for the “Wonders of America, Land of Superlatives, Sweepstakes”). But there are also a number of signs (a page of “Displaced Louisiana Voter Information,” a cute ad entitled “Create Memories With Mail”) that are Scotch

taped—Scotch taped!—up over the very aluminum runners meant to spare the walls from Scotch taping. Horrible!

(4) *Lack of a unified scheme for erecting displays.* Beyond the signs and posters on the walls, there is a disappointing lack of grace to the display stands around the station. A choice ought to be made between plastic, metal, and cardboard display stands, and that choice ought to be enforced.

For example, the rack containing the receipts for “Delivery Confirmation,” “Signature Confirmation,” “Certified Mail,” “Registered Mail,” “International Mail,” and “Express Mail” is plain, clear plastic. This would be fine, except that the Park Slope Station already has two arrays of steel slots designed to hold precisely these forms. This is just the sort of inefficiency that only a total redesign of the station can correct. (Also, someone should restock the following forms: “Customs Declaration A,” “Customs Declaration B,” and “Insured Mail.”)

And then there are the cardboard displays. For example, the shoe-box sized pamphlet dispenser that reads:

Simple Formulas:
1 + 1 = 2
Mail = Business Growth

This dispenser has a pair of triangular cardboard wings that are designed to serve as built-in stand. However, at the Park Slope Station, this stand has been left unconstructed, and the “Mail = Business Growth” dispenser has simply been propped up, on a table, against the wall. Any customer who wants to learn what the Postal Service’s pamphleteers advise concerning business growth risks knocking the display over.

(5) *The matter of tone.* The unequivocal prohibitions of certain signs (“No skates”), do not contrast well with the hucksterism of certain other signs. For example, not five feet away from each other are one bright sign that reads:

U.S. Postal Service® / eBay
Ship It, Win It.

If It Fits, It Ships! Ship *Priority Mail® Flat Rate Boxes*—any weight to any state! Take a Box, and enter your Code from the Entry Form for a chance to win \$10,000 to spend on eBay!

and one grey, faded page that reads:

Your attention: Please.
New software installed.
Additional time will be required for each transaction.
Your patience and cooperation is required.
Thank You.

It makes the whole Postal Service seem schizophrenic, which is unbecoming for an institution founded in the 1780s. The Postal Service should project a tone of austere competence, not manic salesmanship and arbitrary fury.

(6) *Lack of a consistent logo.* Someone needs to decide between the two competing logos: the one of the full eagle in silhouette, wings cocked and talons bared *versus* the one of just the eagle's head, with the dynamic swoosh around it like the parabola of plasma that envelopes a meteor in the upper atmosphere. Instances of the deselected eagle should be eliminated.

(7) *The superfluity of flags.* Will not one flag suffice? Need we have flags on every sign? For example, consider the poster announcing:

Operation Phone Home
We are accepting Phone Cards in any
denomination to be sent to our local
service men and women serving
overseas.

This poster would seem to be patriotic enough. Yet, in the background is a flag. And because this poster was printed on a cheap color printer, the flag is very trippy indeed, and probably best viewed through 3-D specs.

(8) *Lack of a consistent name.* Is it “U.S. Postal Service,” or “USPS”? Or is the whole thing spelled out? As it is on the advertisement for the 34-cent “United We Stand” stamp, an advertisement that reads in part: “And neither snow, not rain, nor heat, nor the winds of change, nor a nation challenged, will stay us from the swift completion of our appointed rounds. We are the 800,000 men and women of the United States Postal Service”?

(9) *The matter of trademark registration.* I didn’t think a public entity could trademark its name, but you know better than me. Still, at present, the ® symbol appears after “USPS” only irregularly, which leaves one with the impression that the Postal Service is lax in protecting its intellectual property. Which reminds me of:

(10) *Lack of wanted posters.* The Park Slope Postal Station has no wanted posters, and I feel it should. What else are children supposed to do while their mothers wait in line to participate in Operation Phone Home, if not memorize the crimes and faces of the FBI’s ten most-wanted? There is a densely printed “Notice Of Reward” sheet, complete with the amounts of money that the Postal Service will pay for information leading to various convictions (“Murder or manslaughter, \$100,000; Bombs or Explosives, \$50,000; Offenses Involving Postal Orders, \$10,000”). While this sign might entertain some older children, especially those interested in the career of bounty hunting, it is unillustrated and offers nothing to those children who are too young to read.

(11) *General difficulty with emphasis.* Next to the “Notice of Reward” sheet is a poster concerning “Rules + Regulations Governing Conduct on Postal Property.” Visitors at the post office probably need to be aware of certain of these “Rules + Regulations,” but rather than being posted prominently by the entrance, these “Rules + Regulations” appear on a single sheet of 8 ½ by 11 paper, and are printed in two columns of 4-point font. By contrast, anyone who waits the twenty minutes that it takes to reach the front of the line at my local postal station is confronted with a sign that reads, in huge script:

WARNING

Armed Robbery of a postal employee or postal facility carries a prison sentence of up to 25 years upon conviction.

Why is the Postal Service emphasizing the rule governing the sentencing of armed robbers? Is it conceding that its Plexiglas shield is impotent?

These difficulties with emphasis are closely related to the:

(12) *General difficulty with redundancy.* The Park Slope Station has two systems for signaling to a customer who has reached the front of the line that his or her turn finally has come: first, there are triangular lamps next to each station that are designed to light up when that station is free; and second, there is an apparatus featuring flashing arrows and the phrase “Clerk Available.” Both of these devices are broken. My point is that the place is cluttered. Which brings me to:

(13) *The matter of opportunistic parasites.* All of the clutter has apparently led to a sense, in Park Slope, that the local postal station is a free-for-all. Private interests (the organizers of a leukemia & lymphoma marathon, the organizers of an HIV/AIDS bicycle ride, the organizers of the New York Methodist Hospital’s Bereavement Workshop) have now taken to posting their own signs and display kits around the postal station. These may be benevolent causes, but their signs only add to the clutter, and distract from the Postal Service’s own, frantic efforts to communicate with its customers.

(14) *Typos.* I found one. On the sign about how to cash a money order, at the end of the list of acceptable forms of photo identification, there is a dangling bullet point.

Can nothing be done to improve this situation, Postmaster Potter? I do not doubt that, right here in Park Slope, there are design consultants who would volunteer their time to giving the place a new look. Yes—volunteer! Because if there is one thing we can all agree upon, as citizens and Americans, it is that Mail = Business Growth.

Respectfully Yours,

Rudolph Delson