

*i*Communication: Attracting New Members

By Francis Adams

Part I

Philately is fighting a battle to stay relevant in today's culture and to interest new people in collecting stamps. New members for clubs and societies are sparse. The question: How can we actively promote our hobby to the public in today's electronic environment?

One answer is by using the same modern tools that business and marketing organizations use to sell us stuff.

The general public searches for information or items they wish to buy using personal computers connected to the internet rather than going to the library or local shopping malls. The big names on the web are main gateways — Google for information, Amazon for books and music, and eBay for auction items. Modern philatelists use these same gateways for the same reasons.

Philately on the Web

Philately is becoming technologically savvy, now sharing information via the internet. There are many stamp collecting web sites, personal as well as those sponsored by societies, and the number continues to grow which is good for philately as a whole.

One problem, however, is that philatelic web sites are typically difficult to find unless you know specifically what you're looking for. Think of local members knowing where the church is but visitors who might like to attend can't find the back road leading to it.

Using internet search tools, few philatelic web sites appear unless the search words are very specifically targeted. That makes it difficult for collectors and exhibitors to use this great technological resource. Computers should help us find things easily.

If a computer knew we were philatelists, often looking for philatelic-related sites, stamp related results would appear every time. That's not happening soon, so a better option might be to build philatelic web sites so they appear more often in search results — for everyone, not only philatelists.

Imagine if you would, millions of people searching for things. A philatelic-related web site appears on the first search result page for every search. How many visitors might those sites gain by curious people clicking the links? How many of those visitors might become interested and start collecting? Or, worse still, join a philatelic society?

We Need To Be Found

Web site statistics show how many visits a web site receives, typically, in a given day. We need to know how many human visits a site gets.

Those visits can be broken into general categories such as visitor origin, pages visited, how long they stayed and which page they entered or exited the web site from. Stats also record if the visit originated from a search engine such as Google and what search terms were used.

Search engine visits are typically new people. Bookmark visi-

tors are a loyal following, likely collectors. Search terms such as philately or stamp collecting indicate someone specifically interested in finding philatelic web sites, again usually collectors. If the home page is the only page visited or the visit length is under 30 seconds, they are likely not interested in philately or find nothing compelling enough for them to stay and explore.

I have watched web statistics for a few years and sites with thousands of visitors per month get less than 10 percent of search engine visitors to stay longer than 30 seconds. Why only 10 percent?

Let's say you're in a coffee shop, on a busy street, looking out the window. Each person that passes and looks at you through the window is a potential acquaintance. How many stop to say hello? How many saw the book you're reading and wonder where you got it? How many would like to know your life story?

Getting Eyeballs

What if searchers, collector or not, were exposed to philatelic information for general search terms? What if a philatelic related web site appeared on every search result page whenever *anyone* did a search for *anything* on Google?

That number would be in the millions per minute. If that ratio held true, the number of visitors to many philatelic web sites would increase substantially. Let's take this idea a step further.

The 90 percent leaving quickly entered a general search term in a search box and philatelic web site xyz had that term in its content and appeared in the search results (more accidental than purposeful). The person searching clicks the link and voilà — we have a visiting potential acquaintance.

What if some of that 90 percent actually found the content of a philatelic web site interesting and stayed longer? Would we recruit more members for the respective societies? Statistically, more eyeballs should equal more interested visitors and eventual members.

Non-collectors may become curious enough to stay if they see an interesting search result, but they won't visit if they don't find a search result with a link to click.

I hear the naysayers — "they wouldn't be interested anyway" and "getting 90 percent is unrealistic."

First, please show me the data that says they wouldn't be interested. Various small societies (philatelic and otherwise) have membership gains through their websites that would not have happened without good search terms built in.

Second, we're not after the entire 90 percent, only a fraction of that number.

We need to draw a new box to think outside of and look at ways to reach out using tomorrow's tools and technology if we really expect philately to survive. We need to push our web sites higher up the list on the search result page to get those eyeballs and members.

Suggestions solicited ...

The next installment will cover meta tags, page titles, and keywords that will ensure your content will be found.

