

Are Postage Stamps Technical Communication?

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While enrolled in a Rhetoric of Technical Communication class at the University of North Texas, I learned that technical communication is the rhetoric of the scientific method and an aid for audiences. The class agreed that, to be successful communication, information needed to be usable and accessible and convey a call to action. STC, it seems, would agree with this definition. According to www.stc.org/about, STC's mission is to “advance the theory and practice of technical communication across all user abilities and all media.”

One assignment challenged us to present how an everyday item achieved the rhetorical goals of technical communication. Intrigued by the communicative powers of graphics, I chose the postage stamp. A purist in my class questioned whether a stamp could be technical communication. After all, most stamps have no words!

A Brief History

Up for the challenge, I began my research. The first stamp appeared in England in 1840 as a means to end a complicated rate system and inefficient operations. Queen Victoria's image was chosen to give people living in remote British colonies and territories a glimpse of their leader. On its first day, 2,500 of the stamps were sold; and, for sixty years, most of the world's population had a picture of Queen Victoria.

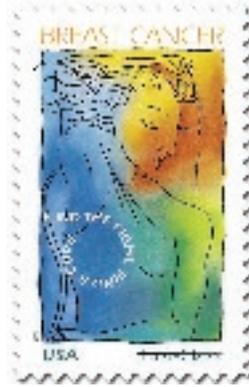
In most other countries, early stamps featured civil leaders. In addition to solving key problems of postal systems, stamps achieved a distinct communicative aim—conveying leadership through a tiny image. Eventually, the subjects depicted on stamps expanded to tell the story of a country's geography, history, and economy. And, despite economic, cultural, and language barriers, stamps helped promote ideas, advertise products, and honor famous citizens.

Rhetorical Goals

But is the information conveyed by stamps usable and accessible? Stamps adorn every letter that we send or receive; clearly, they are usable. As for accessibility, I recall that my first grade teacher used the stamp as a segue between her letter-writing and geography units, introducing us to a much larger world. When I accompanied my father to the post office, I would stand on tiptoe as the patient postal employee showed me the stamps in his drawer.

Do stamps evoke a call to action? I've read that most people open stamped letters before they open mail with indicia (the red machine imprinting); some companies actually pay someone to put stamps on their letters. We expect that envelopes with “love” stamps contain wedding or engagement announcements, those with holiday stamps contain holiday greetings, and so on. Will the jury duty stamp that recently went on sale in the United States cause people to perform their civic duty? Time will tell.

But without a doubt, the “semipostal” (fundraising) stamps of the U.S. Postal Service (USPS) have caused Americans to take action. According to the USPS, in its first three years, the Stop Family Violence stamp contributed \$3.1 million to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services for its domestic violence programs. The Heroes of 2001 stamp raised \$10.5 million to provide assistance to the families of relief personnel killed or permanently disabled in the line of duty in connection with the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001. (For more information on USPS semipostal stamps, go to www.usps.com/communications/community/semipostals.htm).



The Breast Cancer stamp has not only raised more than \$53.1 million since 1998, it provides an excellent example of technical communication by addressing a difficult topic. In this small area, artist Whitney Sherman achieves the following goals:

- Gets her audience's attention with the colorful stamp
- Conveys the subject and goal of the stamp
- Offers an opportunity to contribute money for research
- Teaches how to conduct a self-examination
- Reminds people to perform a regular self-examination

The Power of Images

I'm sure some readers will question whether stamps achieve the rhetorical goals of technical communication. But these graphical add-ons have led me to visit intriguing countries I might have overlooked and to learn the names of flowers and other tidbits of information. A gentle reminder to do a self-examination even helped me discover a lump (benign, thankfully) in my breast. In my opinion, Mom was right: a picture can be worth a thousand words. **i**

RESOURCES

Broich, Bill. “Annuity Marketing: Use a Real Postage Stamp.” ezinearticles.com/?Annuity-Marketing-Tip:-Use-a-Real-Postage-Stamp&id=577153

Wilkinson, Robert. “Direct Mail—Getting Your Envelope Opened.” www.eborsystems.com/11.html

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