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Opt-out services lighten the load in your mailbox

By Tom Watson

Special to The Seattle Times

A piece of junk mail by its very nature has no useful life. It often doesn't even get opened. But junk mail as an environmental issue has had amazing staying power.

Although unwanted paper mail has remained a persistent annoyance and waste problem for more than 40 years, now we can finally see some light at the back of the mailbox.

Q: Why has it been so hard to stop junk mail?

A: To an irritated recipient of unwanted mail, solutions seem simple. For instance, all mailers could be required to honor opt-out requests, with a "Do Not Mail" registry similar to the national "Do Not Call" list to restrict telemarketing. Or we could have an opt-in system, where a company could not send you mail without prior consent.

But for the huge and powerful U.S. direct-mail industry, those solutions pose a major threat to their profits and freedoms. Government regulation of unwanted mail could result in elimination of thousands of direct mail-related jobs, according to the industry. In addition, reduction of junk mail could make the U.S. Postal Service's already shaky financial situation even shakier.

Supporters of reduction efforts say direct mail is an advertising system built on waste and resource consumption, with governments and taxpayers paying the costs for disposal or recycling of junk mail.

Q: What else complicates this issue?

A: Contrary to popular misconception, junk mail does not include all advertising or solicitation mail. Only unwanted mail is truly junk mail, which makes it difficult to quantify the problem. The U.S. Postal Service says it delivered 9.3 billion pounds of standard mail (most advertising mail) in 2009, and we can assume a significant portion of that was unwanted.

Many charitable organizations and nonprofits that rely heavily on direct mail for donations have concerns about junk-mail regulation. And political advertising is constitutionally protected, making that mail untouchable.

Junk mail can be recycled with mixed paper in the Seattle area and much of the nation. This keeps it out of the landfill, but recycling also has costs and doesn't address the resource consumption issue.

Q: What's the latest in opt-out services for unwanted mail?

A: Catalog Choice (www.CatalogChoice.org), a free nonprofit service started in 2007, has made it easier for people to get off mailing lists for specific catalogs. This service is in the process of adding other types of advertising mail and unwanted phone books to its menu.

In response to Catalog Choice, the Direct Marketing Association industry group revamped its long-standing but not always user-friendly "Mail Preference Service" two years ago, setting up a free online service called www.DMAchoice.org.

Q: Is anything happening locally?

A: In January, the Seattle City Council passed a resolution calling on Washington state to set up a "Do Not Mail" registry. Seattle and King County are also considering a joint arrangement with Catalog Choice to set up a "one-stop shopping" website for opting out of unwanted mail.

Q: What are the best ways for now to reduce unwanted mail?

A: Explore the Catalog Choice and DMAchoice websites and sign up for one or both, depending on your mail-reduction needs and how easy you find them to use. If you don't have Internet access, use a library computer or ask someone to help you register online. Avoid services that charge a fee for junk-mail reduction. For local mailings, you usually will need to contact a problem mailer directly.

Q: Isn't paper advertising mail disappearing because of the Internet and the recession?

A: Not that much. Advertising mail in the U.S. has decreased more than 20 percent since 2007, but that still leaves 82 billion pieces of mail. When that mail is unwanted, it's an ignoble fate for a tree.

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