

A GB collector's view of stamp marketing by Martin Balls



From left: Collecting British stamps leaflet and stamp programme (above), 1969; first Stamp Bug calendar and Collector's Guide (below), 1980; and leaflets for Christmas stamp promotions, 1988 and 1987

IN MY FIRST ARTICLE last December, I mentioned that I enjoyed collecting stamps and covers that have been genuinely used, be it for private correspondence, for commerce or government rather than philatelic items specially marketed to collectors. But displaying just stamps on album pages can make a collection fairly monotonous, however attractive – even valuable – the stamps are in themselves. I remember a fantastic collection of Classic Mauritius at a noted exhibition that lacked any ‘oomph’ at all. So I have tried to set my stamps in context by looking at stamp ‘marketing’ when putting my collection together – my thumbnail definition might be ‘how these stamps were sold’.

Accordingly, here I aim to outline some of these areas. This article is very much a framework, and still requires much information: data is not yet published in many areas, and I welcome corrections to my inaccuracies, or further facts and ideas. The intention was originally to write just on one part of stamp marketing, retail stamp point-of-sale, but hopefully this will establish a pattern for future articles by other writers – lots of research is possible. It is hard to write without access to statistics but I'm sure these will emerge from time to time, so it's a personal view, with

some guesswork. Much material on individual issues and promotions has been gleaned by observation, and proved difficult to research; those who sell stamps are invariably unaware of a collector's motives, indeed they are often suspicious of them – with large retailers such information is seen as competitively sensitive; but it's the sort of marketing data that may well be consigned to the bin in a few years time.

Bureau customers will be well aware of how Post Office stamp information services have mushroomed since 1963. The *Bulletin* itself, initially a typed sheet, is now a most successful publication of Royal Mail's Design Department; the Bureau's little black and white *Insight* of forthcoming issues was replaced in late 1996 by *Stamp Preview*, accompanied by coloured mailshots – what a difference from the first tentative lists issued on ‘Roneo-ed’ paper back in 1960s. At the other end of the scale, to encourage young collectors, apart from the regular reply from Santa every Christmas to young hopefuls The Post Office came up with Sammy the Stamp Bug. The Stamp Bug Club had started by 1980, and now has over 70,000 members world-wide. It became the Collectors Club in 1995, and is augmented by Young Letter Writer competitions and so on.

Serious marketing After the profusion of stamp issues from 1963 and progressing through the 1960s and 70s with first day covers, presentation packs (Shakespeare 1964), year packs and miniature sheets, (SG MS 1058/1099/1119), we saw the start of serious marketing in 1979 with Christmas stamp booklets – items produced to meet a real user need. By 1985, discounted stamp booklets were becoming an annual issue. Stamps issued in such booklets are easy to spot when mint, as they have stars in various forms printed on the back over the gum. You can obtain good used copies of these by checking to see if there is a possibility of them being issued with such stars, then by floating them off very carefully and quickly. The 1985 10 × 17p stamp booklet for the price of 9 (£1.53) was issued with a double D over the gum, (incidentally, the only time a recent special stamp other than a Christmas stamp was issued on its own in a booklet). Although I've never seen comparative sales figures for discounted booklets, the evidence is that for some major discounts they were highly successful; over half the 17p stamps which I have subsequently come across in kiloware (surely a random sample) have this D on the back (SG1290Eu) although they were also issued in sheet form without the D (SG1290). I'm sure there is scope for a repeat of this.

After the arrangements with *Reader's Digest* which ran from 1981 on an annual project basis at least until 1995, other attempts were made for deals with commercial companies. Between 21 November and 17 December 1987, at Waterloo and Cardiff stations it was possible to buy a pack of 36 × 13p (SG1375) Christmas stamps using your Barclaycard PIN number from a PINPOINT dispenser, all for £4.60, a saving of 8p! The experiment was not repeated.

In November and December 1988, an offer was made with Nescafé for Christmas stamps in exchange for coffee jar labels. First you had to redeem your labels with Nestlé for vouchers to be swapped at the PO counter, 2100 grammes



worth of labels for 20 × 2nd class stamps (SG1414). It meant buying seven large jars, and again I did not see a repeat.

A whole new avenue of collecting

These minor ventures were overshadowed by the major innovation that took place in selling stamps to the public in August 1987, selling stamps through shops other than post offices. A whole new avenue of collecting – retail booklets – was made possible. A most obvious side effect with the launch of these 'windows' books through shops and the setting up of Royal Mail Retail was the growth of postal ephemera (literally material that only lasts a day).

To start with these were just small notices advising customers that a 1st class stamp cost 19p, but as new post office have replaced Crown POs within high street retailers, even in CPOs themselves, we've seen flyers and stickers from signs on doors 'Stamps sold here/buy your stamps here' (in English and Welsh), through shelf edges, till stickers and shelf wobblers, to single and double counter display units with their pilfer-proof sample books and cards, A4 clear plastic poster holders and Greetings stamp carrier bags.

Retail Post, sent to participating shopkeepers from Royal Mail Retail, details exactly when booklets are to be issued and withdrawn, accompanied by point of sale with wobbling reindeer (1993) wobbling Olympic booklets or robins (1996).

In the 10 years since the changes, there have been numerous variations, with different typefaces, formats and designs. Of course, point-of-sale in post offices themselves is not new, and although the formats themselves have changed, full colour A4 sheets have been placed in most POs where space permits for most special issues since at least 1975. We have even seen A0 sized backlit posters for both the 1994 Messages and 1995 greetings booklets in bus shelters.

ST. AUGUSTINE & ST. COLUMBA

CHRISTMAS STAMPS NOW



Stamps Stimulate

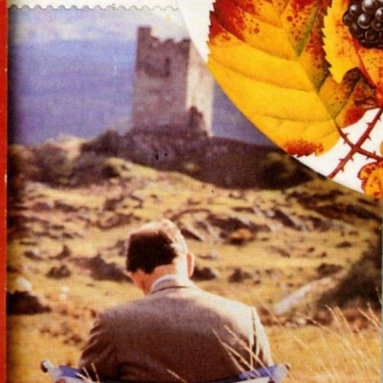
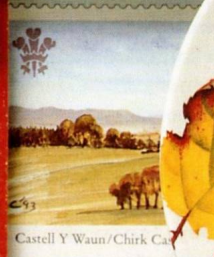
ISSUE DATE

1st
February



PSM: 2644

Missions of Faith
Stamps available from 11 March.



ISSUE DATE

1st
March



Charity Stamp

22 January 1975
only on request



This stamp has a postage value of 4½p

The net proceeds of the 1½p donation will be distributed to the Trustees of the charities appointed by the National Council for the Disabled.



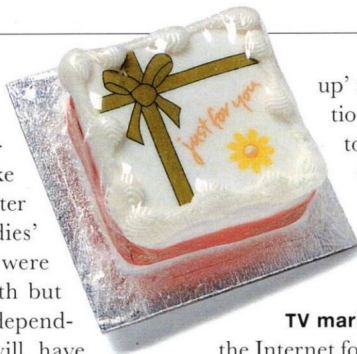
Send them a bear hug

New books of 10 First Class Greetings Stamps with 20 new stickers



...en up a world of memories

Back in early 1960s 2s stamp booklets were sold with 2½d and ½d stamps in various formats for holiday makers to make up the 2½d postcard and 3d letter rates. But by 1989, the 'Teddies' Greetings stamps (SG1423-7) were being issued, slow to start with but later selling quite successfully depending on design. Maybe we will have tourist booklets in the future?



up' in any way after such a promotion, which is surprising. I have yet to work out how to mount a cake (or four!), let alone a kite, but the supporting point-of-sale and offer details are most colourful and informative.

Special promotions In-house experiments using stamp booklets in marketing certain items like 'stampers' (1994), Benjy Bear/Harry Hedgehog (1995) and trips to the Olympics (1996) proved quite successful (I wonder who won?), while the 1996 'Send a Cake' promotion really took off. I've got the note telling me I'd have to wait for my cake due to huge public demand! Apparently the 1997 Flowers offer was even better supported.

As promotions and sales through retailers have increased, Royal Mail has set up deals with particular chains to sell stamps in their own way. I find these particularly fascinating. So far, there have been promotions with Thorntons Chocolates (1994), W H Smith (kites and stationery), J Sainsbury (1995), ASDA (1996), Boots (for greeting cards in August 1994, since moved out further into other high street card shops), and the recent Marks & Spencer blister packs (Christmas 1996-March 1997).

W H Smith Business Supplies (Niceday) made great play of the Cartoons Greetings stamps, and I have had much amusement tracking down how these promotions worked in practice, but it is not my place here to guess why some promotions seem to have failed or at least only been pursued once. Public pilfering seems to be a major cause of failure...while staff training (or lack of it) seems to be another. How many collectors have been into a retail outlet a couple of weeks after the launch of a certain special booklet offer to be met by blank stares from shop staff, or even suspicion from managers when we know more than they do? Yet I must appear now on dozens of mailing lists, and have never been 'followed

TV marketing Even with the advent of the Internet for cheap and instant use, the volume of posted mail has increased, and Royal Mail now extends its marketing to television advertising. Shortly before most new issues of special stamps we see prime time 20 and 30 second slots on the commercial TV channels. The current campaign takes as its theme 'Stamps stimulate!'

PR or public relations is a part of the marketing mix, even for stamps. The Royal Mail Newsroom issues regular press releases to the national, local and philatelic press, with background information written in a fairly general style, accompanied by black & white and coloured photographs for reproduction in their publications. These sit well with a specialist modern GB collection. With the benefit of hindsight some journalists criticise their accuracy, as they are often written some time before stamps are issued: however I feel it has to be said that they do a good job in keeping us in touch with what is going on – I for one do not wish to be spoon-fed my hobby, although with the efficient way the Bureau runs now, there must be many armchair collectors who haven't visited a post office for years! They can even buy their keyrings, stamp plates and paperweights by mail order...now how do they mount those, I wonder? ●

The author Martin Balls has been collecting stamps since he was six – over 35 years. Whilst specialising in marketing and promotions, he worked for Stanley Gibbons between 1979 and 1982, where he met his wife – not a collector! In 1982 he moved into advertising agencies, then PR; he subsequently ran his own high-tech PR consultancy. He now specialises in mid-range computer software and hardware marketing, working from home in France over the Internet. He collects Great Britain mint and used generally up to 1981, with specialist collections of retail and greetings stamps, Machin definitives and 'regional' country stamps...all preferably on cover.