

CLIMATE COACH

How to keep junk snail mail out of your mailbox forever



Advice by [Michael J. Coren](#)

Climate Advice Columnist

Updated September 27, 2023 at 12:41 p.m. EDT | Published September 26, 2023 at 6:30 a.m. EDT



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In June, I began tracking the junk mail I was receiving. A plea to embark on Princess Cruises. Preapproved credit card offers from banks I'd never heard of. A furniture catalogue from Lulu and Georgia. Some weeks, more than a dozen pieces of unsolicited marketing mail — a.k.a. junk mail — clogged my mailbox.

I'm not alone. Mail volumes in the United States peaked in 2011, but junk mail has continued almost unabated. Last year, roughly 63 billion catalogues, postcards, credit card offers and coupon booklets arrived in America's mailboxes. That's 62 percent of all U.S. household mail, reports the U.S. Postal Service.

This takes a heavy environmental toll. The typical American receives about 41 pounds of junk mail each year, according to the Center for Development of Recycling at San José State University, and much of it ends up in landfills. While recent numbers are hard to come by, the Sierra Club estimates that 80 million to 100 million trees are cut down each year to print junk mail, while cities and counties spend \$1 billion a year to collect and dispose of it.

So after years of ignoring or recycling it, I finally set out to get my mailbox as close to zero junk mail as possible. Services now promise to take care of the problem, and I tried several. After bracing for an extended battle against marketers unseen, it took less than half an hour of work to get rid of most of my junk mail.

You can do it, too.

Why Americans get so much junk mail

The story of direct mail begins in 1835. Attempting to sway religious and civic leaders in the South, the American Anti-Slavery Society mailed out numerous anti-slavery newspapers and pamphlets in what is thought to be the first direct-mail campaign, [according to the Smithsonian National Postal Museum](#). The reaction to it, not unlike today's unsolicited mail, was "swift, widespread, and hostile."

But it took decades for businesses to figure out how to use direct mail profitably. The advent of the typewriter finally allowed retailers to send out cheap blasts of advertisements. Americans were soon flooded with fliers, postcards and catalogues. The [Postal Service estimates](#) these "third-class" mailings swelled from 301 million pieces in 1880 to more than 6 billion pieces by 1930. In 2005, marketing mail eclipsed first-class mail (what people tend to use for letters) for the first time.

Today, junk mail is a lifeline for [the post office](#). In 1970, Congress withdrew taxpayer dollars for the agency, [passing a law](#) directing it to [act like a business by covering its costs](#). But [Congress still required](#) the Postal Service to cover inherently unprofitable parts of running a nationwide system delivering to far-flung, often rural parts of the country [without taxpayer dollars](#). Desperate for money, the Postal Service opened the floodgates by granting marketers preferential access to your mailbox at [one-third the cost](#) of standard mail.

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Today, marketing mail [generates \\$16 billion](#) — 20 percent of the agency's revenue — and represents the majority of mail sent in the United States. This diminishes any chance the United States, unlike the [Netherlands](#), [the United Kingdom](#) and [Canada](#), will move to restrict junk mail anytime soon.

The second reason your mailbox is stuffed with advertisements? They work.

People have little choice but to sort through their mail. [The Postal Service](#) estimates two-thirds of households read or scan their junk mail, while 11 percent say they respond to mailers. "Given the large increase in advertising mail volumes since 1987," [states the post office in its 2020 household diary study](#), "it seems clear that U.S. households read more advertising mail now than in the past."

That has prompted businesses to spend about [\\$225 per person](#) in the United States on direct-mail advertising a year, according to a 2023 analysis of direct-mail advertising by an industry research firm. Junk mail earns a better return than email, social media or digital display ads, [estimates the Association of National Advertisers](#).

You can now choose to opt out of all this paper waste. New technology and do-not-mail registries have made it easier than ever.

Three ways to stop junk mail

Ultimately, stopping most of my junk mail took me less than half an hour over a few months. Here are the three steps to do it.

Stop most advertisements: Check out the Association of National Advertisers' DMAchoice.org. This service lets you stop delivery of catalogues, magazine offers and other junk items from charities, banks and national brands.

DMAchoice says this will stop 80 percent of promotional offers since marketers would rather contact people willing to receive their mail. You can register online for \$4, or by mail for \$5, to stop deliveries for 10 years. There are options to stop mail for a deceased relative and even electronic spam. The process took me about five minutes.

Stop credit card and insurance offers: Never want to see another prescreened credit or insurance offer in the mail? Such solicitations can put you at risk for fraud — but you can opt out. The 1996 Fair Credit Reporting Act led to the creation of OptOutPrescreen.com. The website allows you to opt out for five years online or by calling 888-567-8688.

To stop offers forever, you'll need to sign and return the Permanent Opt-Out Election form. The entire process takes a few weeks to complete, but it only took a few minutes to fill out the form.

Stop mail from specific businesses: For that, I turned to services able to take my name off mailing lists of individual retailers, marketers and charities. Companies you've done business with in the past few years may still be allowed to contact you, charities may sell your name, and some just slip through the cracks.

CatalogChoice.org is a nonprofit organization that has a list of 10,000 businesses and charities. It lets you automatically send an opt-out request to specific companies. Just search the website's pre-populated company list, and a seamless click of the mouse sends a request on your behalf. Best of all, it's free.

For convenience, I wanted a smartphone app. So I bought an annual subscription to PaperKarma for \$24.99. You can also buy a monthly plan for \$3.99. You take a photo of the mailed item, then algorithms try to identify the sender based on the brand or logo on the envelope. You can manually correct any errors, and you can instantly send the advertiser an opt-out request via the app.

The 15-person company says it has 100,000 businesses in its database so far. "PaperKarma is more like a concierge service," says Jeff Treichel, the company's CEO. "We're adding thousands of new mailers to our database every month. If you've got a problem, we're phoning or emailing these people directly on your behalf."

How did it work?

Not all my junk mail stopped. I'm still getting a trickle of mailings from businesses. Rather than junk mail every day or so, it's closer to once or twice a week. I expect it will be a few more months before my various opt-out requests take hold.

And some junk mail will continue: Local mailings such as coupons and grocery fliers addressed to “Current Resident,” as well as political candidates’ campaign materials (protected by the First Amendment), are not blockable.

Reducing the waste of paper was easier than I imagined. I’ll never stop the junk mail altogether, but my only regret is I didn’t try years earlier.

CORRECTION

A previous version of this article incorrectly described how long you can stop marketing mail deliveries permanently through DMAchoice by mail. The article has been corrected.