



## Woo-Hoo!...Bart Simpson on a postage stamp?

by Doug Stout

Starting in May, you can now get Bart Simpson and his whole dysfunctional family on your United States postal stamps. Along with the increase in postal rates from 42 cents to 44 cents, we get the added benefit of the entire Simpson clan. There is the donut-dunking patron of the family Homer, (who will never be confused with Ward Cleaver, or Dr. Huxtable, when speaking of television father role models); his blue-haired wife Marge; the baby, Maggie, who had spent the entire 20 years of the Emmy winning animated show without speaking until recently; the “brains of the operations” — the wise beyond her years daughter Lisa; and of course the perpetual underachiever, an animated “Dennis the Menace” on steroids, the ultimate bad-boy with the slingshot, the anti-role model, and cultural icon, Bart Simpson.

So is this yet another sign of the demise of Western civilization as we know it? We have come a long way from *Father Knows Best*, *Leave it to Beaver*, and *The Cosby Show*, to the longest-running family on a television comedy show being animated misfits. The show is being honored for having been on continuously for twenty years, since its debut as its own show in December of 1989.<sup>1</sup> Prior to that, the show had started as a short feature on the *Tracey Ullman* comedy show. *The Simpsons* has just been renewed for another two seasons, which when completed, will mean that 493 episodes of the show will have graced the Fox airwaves. It has already taken home 24 Emmy Awards, a Peabody Award...and helped to change a nation?<sup>2</sup>

So how did this happen and what does it mean? The United States Postal Service chooses 20 new stamp designs every year from the more than 50,000 suggestions it receives.<sup>3</sup> The 34,000 post offices across the country will issue one billion of *The Simpsons* stamps.<sup>4</sup> Roy Betts, the USPS community relations manager said that he expected *The Simpsons* stamps to sell out.<sup>5</sup> So is this an example of our tax dollars at work? Well, not really. The United States Postal Service is an independent government agency which is funded almost entirely through the revenue it generates for itself through postage and fees charged for its services to its customers.<sup>6</sup> So it has been in business for quite some time with the intention of “breaking even” on its sales and fees. The impact it has on the economy is huge. It has annual revenues of over \$75 billion dollars. The human impact it has is also big. It has the largest volume of any postal service in the world and delivers almost half of the mail delivered worldwide.<sup>7</sup>

So should we be worried about this development and what it says about our society? I don’t know, given the larger issues in our society, I think it is probably best to take the development in stride and not take it too seriously. The people connected with the show certainly understand the irony and have not let it “go to their heads.” The executive producer of the show, James L. Brooks, commented that “We are emotionally moved by the Post Office selecting us rather than making the lazy choice of someone who has benefitted society.”<sup>8</sup> Creator Matt Groening said “This is the biggest and most adhesive honor *The Simpsons* has ever received. I honestly can’t believe it. I thought the Pillsbury Doughboy would come before us.”<sup>9</sup>

The Citizen Stamp Advisory Panel for the United States Postal Service is the body that approved *The Simpsons* stamp. David Failor, executive director of stamp services indicated that the intent is for the USPS stamps to be a mix of the contemporary...and a reflection of our culture.<sup>10</sup> Failor said that the show is not being featured for monetary reasons and that the show “has a significant role in telling the history of our nation, and the stamps raise awareness about the show.”<sup>11</sup> Since the character, Bart Simpson, is a stamp collector himself, Failor added that it would be a great opportunity to interest youngsters in stamp collecting.<sup>12</sup> James P. Cochrane, Postal Service vice president of ground shipping said: “We’re looking to encourage a younger generation to develop an interest in stamp collecting by creating stamps they can relate to...”<sup>13</sup>

While the United States Postal Service executives are pretty adamant that their interests are not monetary in nature,

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I am not sure they should be so defensive. If we are asking them to “pay their own way” in the world and not be dependent on taxpayer revenue, then they need to use good marketing skills and create a product that will sell to the general public. Collectible stamps would seem to be a great money making idea for the Postal Service, and *The Simpsons*, while surely not being role models for a normal American suburban family... (or any other kind of American family for that matter) certainly have a broad and devoted following.

When the post office sells a stamp that is used to mail an envelope, they have to work to earn their 44 cents. They have to collect the piece of mail, transport it to the intended delivery site, and then give it to the intended recipient... at least we hope that is the way it will work... (and in spite of all the jokes at their expense, the way it works a very impressive percentage of the time.)

However, when they sell a stamp that gets put into a “stamp collecting book,” the sale is almost all profit! There is no work or expense involved other than the printing of the stamp and the labor costs in selling the stamp. Collectibles are a great way to make the free enterprise system work and help keep future postal costs from going through the roof. The extensive use of electronic mail and electronic bill paying has cut down on the volume of “snail mail” going through the system and thus costs keep rising. When we decided to stop funding the vast majority of Postal Service operations with tax dollars, we made the implicit decision that they should go into the business of marketing their products. This would seem to be a good marketing tool. In the past we have received letters with Elvis in the top right hand corner... I think in the name of free enterprise... that we can put up with a few envelopes of “Homer” grinning back at us from the corner. I think we should save one of the Bart stamps for our federal income tax returns next year... do you think it will increase our chances of an audit...?

In case you are concerned about what image is being delivered on the corner of the mail coming to your home, you do have a way to influence the process. Stamp image selections are made up to 3 years in advance, so don't wait to make a submission. The Citizen Stamp Advisory Panel is appointed by the Postmaster General and designed to reflect a broad range of expertise.<sup>14</sup> There are 12 criteria that the Panel is looking for in order to consider a new stamp. They can be found at the web site: <http://www.govspot.com/ask/suggestastamp.htm>. Individuals who have ideas they would like to submit, that meet those criteria, can send their submissions to:

Citizens' Stamp Advisory Committee  
U.S. Postal Service  
475 L'Enfant Plaza, SW  
Room 4474EB  
Washington, DC 20260-2437<sup>15</sup>

(Endnotes)

1 Jill Serjeant “The Simpsons’ get the (postal) stamp of success,” *Reuters – Los Angeles*, May 7, 2009, <http://www.reuters.com/article/entertainmentNews/idUSTRE5468WL20090507>, (May 11, 2009).

2 “Lick my Shorts: ‘Simpsons’ Stamps Debut,” *NBC Los Angeles.com*, May 7, 2009, <http://www.nbclosangeles.com/news/local/US-Postal-Service-Issues-Simpsons-Stamps.html>, (May 11, 2009).

3 Ibid.

4 Ibid.

5 Jude O. Marfi, “Simpson Stamps Rouse Ire,” *Roll Call*, May 11, 2009, [http://www.rollcall.com/issues/54\\_128/ath/34751-1.html](http://www.rollcall.com/issues/54_128/ath/34751-1.html), (May 11, 2009).

6 Todd McMurtrey, “Postage prices go up starting today,” *BYU Newsnet*, May 10, 2009, <http://nn.byu.edu/story.cfm/72445>, (May 11, 2009).

7 Ibid.

8 Ibid.

9 Ibid.

10 Marfi.

11 Ibid

12 Ibid

13 McMurtrey.

14 “How do I suggest a postal stamp design,” United States Postal Service, <http://www.govspot.com/ask/suggestastamp.htm>, (May 11, 2009).

15 Ibid.

*Doug Stout is a Research Analyst with the Public Interest Institute, Mount Pleasant, Iowa.*

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