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**You've Sent Mail:
How Constituents Judge Their Representatives by the Snail Mail
They Send—and Ways to Improve Future Correspondence**

**Research Report
January 2011**

Overview

Every year, House Members collectively spend approximately \$23 million to \$25 million on postage for “snail” mail sent to constituents. They spend millions more on paper, printing, and design. A small portion of this mail sent via the USPS is mailed in response to constituent correspondence, but most of it is proactive, unsolicited mail sent to the district’s residents. It is fairly common for Congressional offices to budget at least \$100,000 per year for proactive mail, and while some offices spend less than that (or nothing at all), there are those that spend far more.

This proactive mail takes many forms: small postcards, over-sized postcards, bi-fold and tri-fold mailings of various sizes, mailings with tear-off reply postcards, and letters written on Congressional letterhead—among others.

Considering the massive amount of mail sent, and its wide variety, one would think that over the years Members would have developed some research-based best practices for reaching constituents most effectively through this medium. Judging from the findings uncovered in this report, and from conversations with numerous Congressional offices, Members have been speculating as to what works, as opposed to thinking critically about it, testing it, and acting accordingly. Consequently, millions of dollars worth of mail are being wasted each year by failing to reach their full potential as effective tools for correspondence with constituents.

This report is designed to be a first step in helping guide Members of Congress to mail smarter and more cost-effectively—particularly given the financial constraints Congress is imposing on itself. While extensive in its findings, this report is meant as a starting point for research on the question of mail, not the end point.

One critical consideration related to this topic is that printed mail, sent via the USPS, competes with other forms of communication that have gained wide acceptance in our society in recent years. E-newsletters, Facebook, Twitter, and tele-town halls are among the newer forms of outreach to constituents, and these vie with printed mail for the attention of increasingly distracted constituents. This puts an added onus on Congressional offices to not waste taxpayers' money, and to send snail mail that can break through the clutter of media-generated messages that constituents have to sort through every day.

The increasing competition for constituents' splintered "mind-share" may account for a consistency found throughout the survey results cited in this report: A clear majority of constituents say they are not very likely to read any given piece of Congressional mail sent to them. And these constituents' concern about finances and how government money is spent drives a related opinion: Congressional mail pieces are not a very good use of taxpayers' dollars.

This critical look at Congressional mail should serve as yet another wake-up call to Members that their constituents expect them to spend their tax dollars more wisely. As important, this study serves as a blueprint for helping Members do just that.

Summary of Key Findings

- 1) When in doubt, keep it brief. To get mail read more often by constituents, rely on modest-sized postcards and one-page letters
- 2) Constituents hate homework; don't say it in two pages if you can say it in one
- 3) Over-sized mailings raise constituents' ire
- 4) Mail pieces soliciting constituent feedback are better-regarded than mail pieces that merely inform
- 5) Make sure mail pieces pass the "smell test": Could they plausibly be confused with campaign literature?
- 6) Constituents are skeptical; cite sources for your facts
- 7) Don't skimp on quality in the name of fiscal discipline; save money by mailing smarter
- 8) Older constituents are more likely to actually read what you mail—be kind to them and ditch the small font sizes
- 9) Constituent service is important, but don't send an entire mailing about one specific service to the entire district
- 10) Finely-targeted proactive mail allows Members to tell a nuanced story to key audiences that might otherwise be overlooked
- 11) The younger the constituent, the less bothered they are by the concept of targeting

Study Design and Methodology

This research project contains both a quantitative and qualitative component. On the quantitative side, Presentation Testing conducted a national online survey of 920 registered voters from December 26, 2010 to January 4, 2011. In the survey, we started off by asking respondents a variety of questions about their communications with their Member of Congress. We then instructed them as follows:

For the next set of questions, please imagine that your Congressman is named Michael Adams.

You're going to see four pieces of mail that resemble the types of mail that Congressman Adams might send to your home sometime in the next year. Please imagine that any locations he references in these mail pieces are in your Congressional district.

You will view these mail pieces one at a time, both up-close and at a distance, so you can see each one's actual size and read at least a part of what they say. After you view each one, you will be asked two questions.

The two questions were:

- 1) On a scale from 1 to 10, with 1 being not at all likely, and 10 being very likely, how likely would you be to actually read this piece of mail if you received it from Congressman Adams?
- 2) On a scale from 1 to 10, with 1 being "a poor use of taxpayer dollars," and 10 being "an excellent use of taxpayer dollars," how would you rate this piece of mail if you received it from Congressman Adams?

Presentation Testing created the Michael Adams mail pieces by scanning actual Congressional mail pieces and electronically removing any reference to the actual Member of Congress or his district. We purchased a stock photo of a gentleman who might resemble a Member, and gave him the name Michael Adams, and inserted his photo where the actual Congressman's photo appeared. There were some instances where, in the "real" mail piece, a Member appears with others in a group setting. In those situations we removed those photos and replaced them with a stock photo of an audience, and indicated in the caption that they were listening to Michael Adams speak to them.

Please note that we actually tested 12 different mail pieces in total, and each survey respondent viewed four of the 12, randomly chosen. As a result, approximately each mail piece was viewed on average by just over 300 respondents. We also captured demographic information about all 920 respondents. The margin of error on the total sample of 920 is 3.2%. On the questions related to each mail piece, the margin of error is

5.6%. We weighted the entire sample to bring gender and age more in line with voter data.

On the qualitative side, we conducted two focus groups in suburban Philadelphia (Mt. Laurel, NJ) and two in Raleigh, NC. One suburban Philadelphia group contained 12 moderate Republicans and the other 12 moderate Democrats. One North Carolina group contained 14 moderate Republicans and the other 13 moderate Democrats. We asked each group to evaluate, one piece at a time, between 12 and 14 pieces of Congressional mail. We probed each group to determine why certain attributes of Congressional mail would make them want to (or not want to) read a given piece of it. We also probed as to why some pieces were better or worse uses of taxpayer dollars.

In order to undertake this current study, special thanks belong to Mark Strand, the President of the Congressional Institute. His ongoing commitment to cutting-edge research, combined with the generous support of the Congressional Institute’s board of directors, is having a substantial impact on how well and how often Congress communicates with constituents.

Description of the mail pieces¹ and how they scored in our survey:

#	Title of Mail Piece	Topic	Dimensions	% very likely to read ²	% say very good or excellent use of taxpayer dollars ³
1	Tax Relief for [Name of State]	Taxes	14.92" x 10.92", 1 page front & back	34.8%	24.0%
2	E-newsletter Signup	E-newsletter Signup	8.5" x 11", single page folded in half with tear-off postcard	49.1%	35.3%
3	Healthcare	Healthcare	8.5" x 11", 1 page front and back	41.6%	26.3%
4	Travel Alert: Passports	Passport Renewal Info	8.75" x 12", 1 page front & back	37.5%	26.7%
5	2009 Annual Congressional Report	Annual Report	17" x 11", single sheet folded into four page mailer	33.3%	21.9%
6	Michael Adams’ Job Fair	Job Fair Invitation	11" x 5.75" postcard, 1 page front & back	41.4%	33.8%
7	<i>Reducing Government Spending</i>	<i>Government Spending</i>	<i>30" x 8.5", tri-fold front and back</i>	31.7%	15.2%

¹ All mail pieces EXCEPT 9, 11, and 12 were printed using 4-color.

² This is the % of respondents who rated the piece an 8, 9, or 10 on a 1-to-10 scale.

³ Ibid.

8	Presidents/Debt	Government Spending	17" x 11", single sheet folded into four page mailer	39.4%	30.0%
9	Town Hall Invite	Town Hall Invitation	8.5" x 11", single page letter on letterhead	44.2%	30.6%
10	Making Washington Work for You	Tax hikes	8.3" x 5.4", postcard	41.2%	24.5%
11	Puppy Mills	PUPS Act	8.5" x 11", 2 page letter on letterhead	33.8%	25.3%
12	Conservation	Environment & Open Space	8.5" x 11", 2 page letter on letterhead	33.1%	23.7%

Bold = Highest scoring piece; Italics = Lowest scoring piece

These additional pieces were discussed in our focus groups but were not included in our survey⁴:

Title of Mail Piece	Topic	Dimensions	Reply Card Attached?
"I want to hear from you"	Town hall invite with detachable survey reply card	11" x 6", postcard with detachable postcard	Yes
Healthcare Update	Healthcare	17" x 11", single sheet folded into four page mailer	No
Making Washington Work for You	Making your commute more affordable	8.3" x 5.4", postcard	No
H.R. 554	Posting legislation online for 72+ hours before a vote	8.5" x 11", single page letter on letterhead	No

KEY FINDINGS:

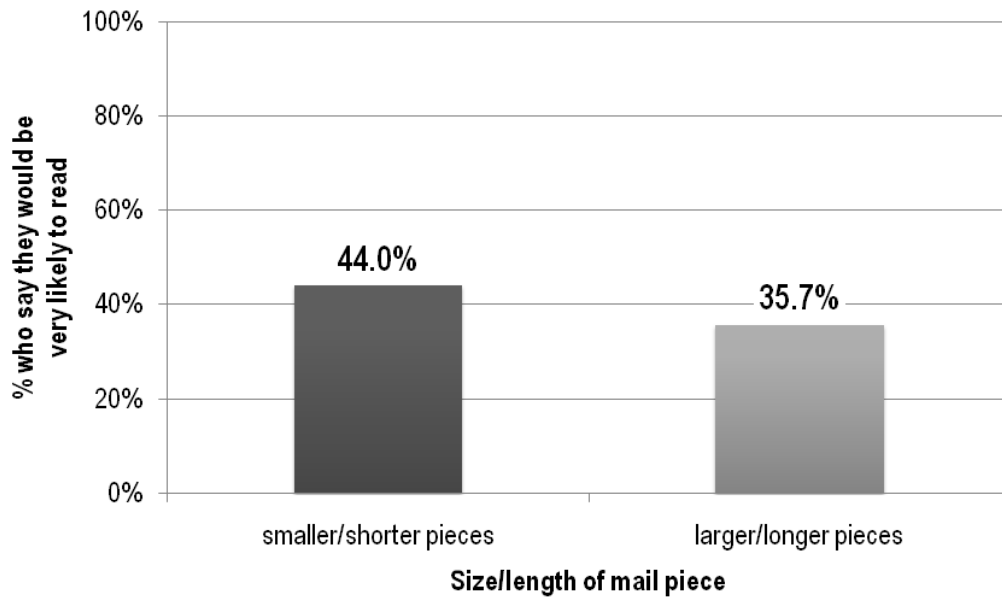
- 1) When in doubt, keep it brief. To get mail read more often by constituents, rely on modest-sized postcards and one-page letters**

Millions of MRA dollars are spent on large, glossy mail pieces. Considerable staff resources are applied to writing extensive proactive letters to constituents. But is the mail currently produced the best use of valuable resources? The answer is no.

⁴ The first three of these four pieces were printed using 4-color.

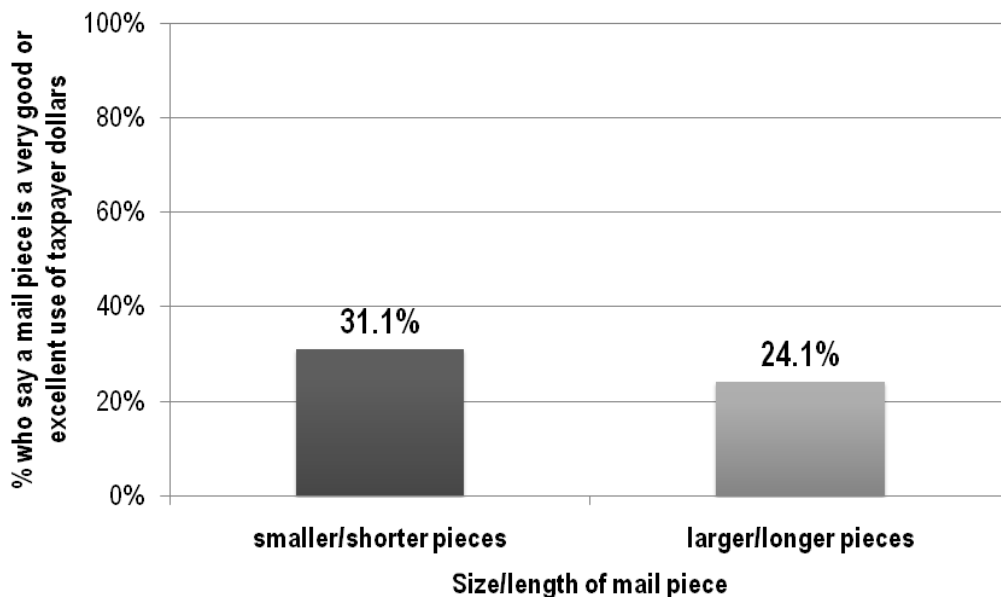
We compared the survey data for the four smaller/shorter pieces in our study (two postcards, a one-page letter, and a small bi-fold mailer with a detachable reply card) to that of the eight larger pieces (one tri-fold, two large bi-folds, one large sized and one over-sized postcard, and two two-page letters). There was a dramatic difference in both of our survey metrics when comparing these categories:

Smaller/shorter mail pieces are far likelier to get read (% who say they would be very likely to read)



Smaller/shorter mail pieces viewed as better use of taxpayer dollars

(% who say a mail piece is a very good or excellent use of taxpayer dollars)



Let's face it—constituents are bombarded by messages from many quarters, and ones from Members are just a few of them. It's always easier to dispense with something short than something long, so a short item tends to win the recipient's attention. As one focus group participant put it:

"We just get so much junk mail. It's not laziness; the post card is just quicker to read."—Marilyn, moderate conservative, suburban Philadelphia

Postcards

We found that among the highest-scoring mail pieces were those printed on postcards, or designed to appear in the size of postcards. In our internet survey we asked respondents to score three of these; one was the highest scoring of all 12 pieces on both the "very likely to read" scale and the "very good or excellent use of taxpayer dollars" scale. Another was second-highest on the "use of taxpayer dollars" scale and a close fourth on the "very likely to read" scale.

The highest-scoring piece was a 8.5" x 11" bi-fold in four-color with a tear-off postcard, designed specifically to encourage constituents to sign up to receive the Member's e-newsletter. Constituents could check certain boxes on the reply card to tell the Member what issues he/she wanted to be updated about in the future. Just under half of our survey respondents (49.1%) said they would be very likely to read

this postcard if it landed in their mailbox. And 35.3% said they would consider this mail piece a very good or excellent use of taxpayer dollars.

In our Raleigh GOP focus groups we heard:

“It’s bi-fold and it’s the right size.”—Kelly, moderate conservative, Raleigh

“It tells you, ‘Tell me what is important to you.’ I like that they are asking you a question.”—Sherrie, moderate conservative, Raleigh

Another high-scoring mail piece from the survey was an 11” by 5.75” inch four-color postcard titled “Michael Adams Job Fair,” where the Congressman invited recipients to a free jobs fair in his district. One-third (33.8%) of survey respondents said this mail piece was a very good or excellent use of taxpayer dollars, while 41.4% said they were very likely to read it if they received it by mail.

In our focus groups with Democrats in Raleigh, participants said that this mail piece demonstrates about Congressman Michael Adams that “he cares,” “he’s helpful,” and the mailing is “bi-partisan” (which is widely viewed as a virtue by moderate partisans on both sides).

The Republicans also had similar comments about this mail piece, with one calling it “clear,” “concise,” “relevant.” But there were detractors, too, in this group, who thought that the piece would not be relevant to those currently employed, or that help for the unemployed should come from states, and not from Federal officials.

These comments about the strengths and drawbacks of the job fair lead to the logical question of how much of the evaluation about all the mail pieces in this report is about form vs. content. Clearly, respondents in our survey and focus groups took both into consideration in their evaluations. While it is impossible to divorce one from the other, consider this: Not one single respondent criticized any mail piece for being too short, but we heard plenty of comments about mail pieces being too long—or longer pieces being too filled with “fluff.”

Short pieces tend to fulfill one or two clearly-defined purposes efficiently. That is their greatest virtue. Longer pieces tend to cover more subjects, demand more of the recipient’s attention, and not reflect as well upon the Member as a result.

The third postcard we sent, related to the prospect of higher tax rates, scored fifth-highest among the 12 mail pieces for a high likelihood of being read (41.2%). It was seventh out of 12 in terms of being a very good or excellent use of taxpayer dollars, with 24.5% affirming it was. There was a clear partisan split over the value of this piece, with Republicans scoring it much higher on both scales than either Democrats or Independents.

Postcard vs. one-page letter

In our focus groups, we asked respondents which mail piece they would be more likely to read, a postcard or a one page letter on Congressional letterhead sent in an envelope. The groups were split on this point. We heard comments on one side:

*“I’d read [the postcard] because it’s smaller, and I’m a mail flipper.”—
Kathy, moderate conservative, Raleigh*

And on the other:

*“The letter on letterhead seems more official.”—Beth, moderate liberal,
suburban Philadelphia*

Focus group participants were also split on which of the two formats was a better use of taxpayer dollars. Some respondents thought the letter would be cheaper to produce, since it was not in four-color, but it would be more expensive to mail, since it would be in an envelope. Conversely, some thought the postcard would be cheaper to mail, since it does not require an envelope, but more expensive to produce, since it is in four-color.

One virtue of the postcard over the letter is this: If Members choose to use a similar template for the postcard for mailings sent consistently during the course of a term, it can be used to boost recognition of the Member’s “brand” over time, visually. For new Members who want to establish themselves with their constituents, having a certain “look” that their mail pieces are known for (in terms of style, tagline, photos) can help build familiarity. We asked participants about this in our groups, and they said they’d prefer to see mail pieces sent periodically in a format they’d immediately recognize—so they’d be more likely to read it again if they’d read it in the past.

2) Constituents hate homework; don’t say it in two pages if you can say it in one

First, a word on letters generally, as compared to four-color mailers: Letters sent on Congressional letterhead avoid a problem that other mail pieces potentially suffer from—i.e., letters don’t pose a risk that they will be confused with campaign literature. And, as our focus group participants repeated endlessly, they resent their tax dollars being used for what visually reminds them of campaign self-promotion. Many of the four-color, non-post-card mailers we showed them inadvertently fit into that category.

Once an office decides to mail a letter proactively, it needs to consider the length. Both our survey results and focus group feedback points in one direction: keep it to one page.

One-page letters vs. Two-page letters

We tested three letters on letterhead—one that was one page and two that were two pages. The one page letter scored far better than either of the others in our survey:

Title of Mail Piece	Topic	Dimensions	% very likely to read ⁵	% say very good or excellent use of taxpayer dollars ⁶
Town Hall Invite	Town Hall Invitation	8.5" x 11", one page letter on letterhead	44.2%	30.6%
Puppy Mills	PUPS Act	8.5" x 11", 2 page letter on letterhead	33.8%	25.3%
Conservation	Environment & Open Space	8.5" x 11", 2 page letter on letterhead	33.1%	23.7%

As covered elsewhere in this report, there is a challenge in separating form from content. Perhaps respondents merely preferred the content of the one-page letter, which invited them to a town hall meeting in their district, to the two-page letters, which may or may not have been of interest to them because of the topic area.

In an attempt to resolve this question, we asked respondents how the two-page letters could have been improved. Repeatedly we were told that they were too long, and would have been far more effective if limited to one page.

In our focus groups, we showed respondents letters of one or two pages, and asked for their feedback. We heard about the one page letter that it was “the cheapest,” “brief,” and “gets right to the point.”

Meanwhile, the two page letters were repeatedly criticized for their length, even ones that respondents firmly agreed with. We heard:

“This [two page letter] is like a resume. Today, you don’t want a resume that reads with three pages. This [one page letter] is right to the point. You pick it up and you instantly know what he’s trying to say. You’re going to get a lot of people who trash that one [the two-pager].”—
Charlotte, moderate liberal, suburban Philadelphia

“After awhile you stop reading it, and there goes your tax dollars... I got to the middle of that [environment letter] and started to get bored. If he

⁵ This is the % of respondents who rated the piece an 8, 9, or 10 on a 1-to-10 scale.

⁶ Ibid.

had done it on a post card, I would've read a little more.”—Beth, moderate liberal, suburban Philadelphia

Some Congressional offices believe that one page is just too short, and they cannot convey all that needs to be said in a page. The easy and effective compromise is to keep the physical letter to one page, but include a URL link to the Member’s Congressional webpage, or other relevant webpages, in the body of the letter.

Note: This guidance is intended for proactive mail, not mail in response to a constituent letter or email. Certainly there will be circumstances where a reply to a constituent will need to run more than one page due to the complexity of the issue. But, in general, constituents don’t like it when you make them do homework—and that’s what sending them long letters feels like.

3) Over-sized mailings raise constituents’ ire

Avoid making your mail pieces extra-large just to gain your constituents’ attention. While it may be effective as an attention-getting tool in a campaign, over-sized mail is not well-regarded by constituents when applied on “the official side.”

We tested a piece called “Tax Relief for [Name of State],” which was one page front and back, and measured 14.9” x 10.9”. This was received poorly in both our survey respondents and focus groups, with only 24% of survey participants scoring it as a very good or excellent use of taxpayer dollars.

Participants in our moderate conservative suburban Philadelphia group mentioned that this over-sized piece would have been more appealing if it had been designed as a folded pamphlet. Some participants also thought that it would be expensive to print. Here are some other comments we heard:

“It wouldn’t fit in my mailbox.”—Female, moderate liberal, Raleigh

“It looks like a place setting. It doesn’t even make me want to look at it.”—Brian, moderate liberal, Raleigh

“It’s expensive to print, and it’s just boring... [and] it looks more like an advertisement, and it’s also an awkward size... It should be stapled to a pole.”—Gina, moderate liberal, suburban Philadelphia

“[There’s] a lot of ink used.”—Mario, moderate liberal, suburban Philadelphia

“I liked the message. It was just the format I had an issue with.”—Charlotte, moderate liberal, suburban Philadelphia

“I believe this could cost \$2 or more [per piece], with the colors and size.”—Male, moderate conservative, Raleigh

The mailing that had the worst scores in our poll was a piece titled “Reducing Government Spending,” and was a 30” x 8.5” tri-fold, front and back. Only 31.7% of participants said that they would be very likely to read it, and only 15.2% identified it as a very good or excellent use of taxpayer dollars. Here’s what we heard in our groups:

“Everything is blown up. That’s ridiculous, it’s not necessary. Are we that blind that we can’t see it?”—Christopher, moderate liberal, suburban Philadelphia

“It’s awkward to hold too. If you get that in all your mail, it’s awkward to hold.”—Amy, moderate liberal, suburban Philadelphia

“The more folds, the more expensive. That’s the way I look at it.”—Joseph, moderate liberal, suburban Philadelphia

Another pet-peeve our participants pointed out was a mailing that had a lot of “wasted space.” Here are some comments we heard about two larger pieces, the first one being “Tax Relief for [Name of State]”:

“There’s all that [un-used] real-estate [of white space, and yet] he’s asking us to reach out to him in that little tiny text.”—Tom, moderate conservative, suburban Philadelphia

“[There’s] a lot of wasted space on there.”—Christopher, moderate liberal, suburban Philadelphia

We asked about the “Presidents/Debt” mailer in the polls, which was a single sheet folded into a four page mailer, and measured 17” x 11”. It scored so-so, with 39.4% of participants saying they would be very likely to read it, and 30.0% scoring it as a very good or excellent use of taxpayer dollars. Here are some comments we heard:

“I’d cut out the picture of the Presidents and use it for my kids to make a collage.”—Sherrie, moderate conservative, Raleigh

“It’s a lot of wasted space on it. It has no content worth reading. The only thing I do like is you can visit AmericaSpeakingOut.com. [Also,] the chart about the debt, I don’t like.”—Sara, moderate conservative, Raleigh

“I like the chart, but the whole point of this mailing is to get you to go here [[to AmericaSpeakingOut.com](http://AmericaSpeakingOut.com)]. So, why didn’t you put the chart on one side and say, ‘give us your ideas’? You could make it really small. [This is] a waste of resources.”—Diana, moderate conservative, Raleigh

4) Mail pieces soliciting constituent feedback are better-regarded than mail pieces that merely inform

Among a wide array of mail pieces, ones that demonstrate Members are listening to constituents and want their feedback are most likely to be read, and are viewed as the best use of taxpayer dollars.

The e-newsletter sign-up mailer, described in finding #1, is the best example of this. Besides scoring at the top of our survey results, it also garnered these comments from focus group participants:

“I think it’s [a good use of taxpayer dollars]. This is one of the few things I’ve seen that asks for your input for something. It may not be everything. It’s not informative, but it’s asking for your input. Whether they read it or make a chart out of it, they’re getting something from their constituents.”—Ron, moderate conservative, Raleigh

“If this was my Congressman, that [mail piece] closes the gap between me and [him] for my communication. I’m willing to give them my email address, and that should be the last [snail] mailing from my Congressman to my home.”—Timothy, moderate liberal, Raleigh

“He creates the illusion that he really cares about what you’re interested in.”—Connie, moderate liberal, Raleigh

Intimate you are listening to constituents

Another mailing that tested well in our poll and in our focus groups was Adams’ healthcare mailer, which was an 8.5” x 11”, one page mailer (front and back). In our poll, 41.6% of participants said that they are very likely to read this healthcare piece. We heard from one constituent:

“I like that it’s directed at the majority of Americans. It makes me feel like he’s actually thought about my position on it.”—Sara, moderate conservative, Raleigh

Provide a tear-off card

We learned that mailings that provide a tear-off card for the constituent to contact the Congressman to sign-up for the Member’s e-newsletter are extremely well received.

There was a mail piece that respondents evaluated in our suburban Philadelphia focus groups that we did not include in the survey, and it received an enthusiastic endorsement from both Democrats and Republicans there. This 11” x 6” piece was headlined “I want to hear from YOU!” and listed all of the Member’s upcoming town

hall meetings in the district. But what made it so well regarded was a message—clearly highlighted in red below the list of town hall meetings—that read, “Can’t make it? I still want to hear from you.” And that message was followed by a red arrow pointing to the postcard’s detachable, perforated reply card, where constituents could answer a brief three question survey and provide their e-mail address.

Here are some comments we heard in our suburban Philadelphia group of moderate conservatives about this piece:

“[The mailing] says ‘I want to hear from you.’ And they give you a post card to rip off. [That says to me], ‘I really do want to hear from you—I’m giving you a post card.’”—JoAnne, moderate conservative, suburban Philadelphia

“They make it easy for you.”—Brian, moderate conservative, suburban Philadelphia

“[It gives] the different places of the town hall meetings. That was interesting—you know where to go! It leaves me with a warm feeling towards the Congressman.”—Lenore, moderate conservative, suburban Philadelphia

“My reaction would be—I’m going to the town hall.”—Mike, moderate conservative, suburban Philadelphia

“I liked how he gave you the option, if you can’t make the town hall, here’s how to contact me.”—Tom, moderate conservative, suburban Philadelphia

“I like that it has the contact numbers on the other side. My area, my guy to reach.”—Dan, moderate liberal, suburban Philadelphia

The Adams e-newsletter signup mail piece referred to earlier also included a tear-off postcard; however, that tear-off was in the shape of an “L” and had to be torn in two places to detach it from the main mailing. The “L”-shaped detach was less popular among suburban Philadelphia groups than the straight-line detach, and our participants said that they’d be more likely to mail back a postcard that is easier to tear off.

“The [straight line detachable postcard] would be easier to rip off, because of the ‘L’ shaped cut perforation [on this one]. I think subconsciously, having to tear it in two places affected our scores.”—Mike, moderate conservative, suburban Philadelphia

“There’s something about the tear off that’s awkward. The ‘L’ shape.”—Charlotte, moderate liberal, suburban Philadelphia

Supplying outreach information can partially redeem a lackluster mailing

Among mail pieces that did not score well overall, we found there were nonetheless portions related to hearing from constituents and connecting with them that stood out positively.

In our poll, the Adams' 2009 Annual Congressional Report scored next to last of all 12 mail pieces for both likelihood of being read and very good or excellent use of taxpayer dollars. It was a 17" by 11" four-color mail piece covering five different issue areas: "Spending, Taxes & Debt," "Bailouts," "Financial Crisis," "Healthcare," and "Stimulus." It was also very text-heavy. Only 33.3% of participants said that they would be very likely to read the piece, and only 21.9% said that it was a very good or excellent use of taxpayer dollars.

There were a number of negative comments about it from the Raleigh conservatives, such as:

"It's so long, so boring."—Billie, moderate conservative, Raleigh

"It's a PR campaign. There are no facts and figures or anything worth reading in there."—Diana, moderate conservative, Raleigh

"I think it's just fluff. There's not a lot of meat. It's something you'd put in the bathroom for your husband to read."—Sherrie, moderate conservative, Raleigh

"There's nothing in here that hasn't been published [before] in some way."—Sara, moderate conservative, Raleigh

Despite its poor performance in the research, one focus group participant liked the accessibility component:

"I would read it because it said Annual Congressional Report, and it covers several different things, then it gives you computer places [to go to]: Youtube, Twitter, and Facebook."—Connie, moderate liberal, Raleigh

And we heard this similar comment about the Adams healthcare mailer:

"He reached out to me with this. What I like, and it's a simple thing, but it's got his email address there where I can do my part and meet him halfway for additional information."—Timothy, moderate conservative, Raleigh

It would help if Members paid the freight on reply postcards

Some constituents resented that they would have to put a stamp on a reply postcard to mail it back to a Member (though under House rules that's what's required; no participants knew that).

Here's what we heard about Adams's popular "I want to hear from you" mail piece:

"Is there a place where postage gets put on it? That really irks me. Because it should've been free. If he wants to hear from me, why should I have to put postage on it? He has more money than I do. I'm biting my tongue. I just feel that free postage says, 'Hey, I'll send it in.' Because even if I didn't care, I'd send it in. Postage free!"—JoAnne, moderate conservative, suburban Philadelphia

"I think you'd be more likely to send it back if it included the postage."—Rose, moderate conservative, suburban Philadelphia

"We're already paying for the piece of mail, they could incorporate it, and they have bar code technology so it wouldn't cost anything."—Mike, moderate conservative, suburban Philadelphia

"Postage free, with a caveat that if you supply your own stamp you're helping [lower] the national deficit."—Brian, moderate conservative, suburban Philadelphia

5) Make sure mail pieces pass the "smell test": Could they plausibly be confused with campaign literature?

In all of our groups, we heard caustic comments about certain pieces looking like campaign mailings. Some participants also initially assumed some of the mailings they were studying were campaign pieces until informed otherwise.

In all instances, campaign-reminiscent mail pieces were viewed negatively. Here are some comments we heard about the Adams healthcare mailing, which was 8" x 11" and included bright blue colors and large type fonts:

"I feel like this is so campaign-y...It seems like it's trying to lead and convince whatever he did is right, rather than just stating, 'I voted no, the President is ignoring the majority.' It just looks like every other campaign thing you get during that time."—Franklin, moderate conservative, Raleigh

"I'd say the same people who were doing his campaign publicity did this."—Diane, moderate conservative, Raleigh

“I’ve never gotten anything that looks like this. Most of the stuff I get from my congressman is in an envelope, is better presented and looks official. This looks like something that would come from the campaign, and not paid for by the U.S. government.”—Richard J., moderate liberal, Raleigh

Here’s what we heard from one participant about the extra-large tri-fold in four-color ironically titled “Reducing Government Spending”:

“I don’t see the relevance of it, other than being campaign-y. What is the purpose of sending something like this out? I don’t know.”—Ed, moderate conservative, Raleigh

Finally, we heard this about the oversized “Tax Relief for [Name of State]” mailing:

“[It looks like a campaign piece,] especially with the clichéd demographic pictures. He’s touched all the bases, even the single white female who opens a business, apparently.”—Judd, moderate liberal, Raleigh

“It looks more like a campaign piece than it did official business.”—Brian, moderate conservative, suburban Philadelphia

6) Constituents are skeptical; cite sources for your facts

We heard in many instances that our participants did not like a mail piece because the information in it was “false.” We probed on this point to understand their mindsets: Do they doubt the accuracy of information supplied by their Member of Congress, and believe that there is no system in place to check for verifiably false information?

Below are some comments we heard about Adams’ healthcare mailing when we asked if it was a good use of taxpayer dollars. NOTE: In huge, half-inch type on the mailer, Adams says, “I VOTED NO,” and then in somewhat smaller type it continues with “on this government regulation of healthcare, and I will now work to repeal it and replace it with real, market-driven solutions to America’s healthcare problems. I work for you.” It does not cite the bill number, however, or date of the vote.

“I really don’t know whether he went no or yes. I’ll always have that question. He says he voted no, but did he? That would be my question.”—John, moderate conservative, Raleigh

“I’d go check [that he actually voted like he said he did.]”—Diana, moderate conservative, Raleigh

“It should be [checked for factual accuracy.]”—Female, moderate conservative, Raleigh

All of the participants in our moderate conservative group in Raleigh said “no” when we asked if they think any facts reported in Congressional mail are checked for accuracy. We pushed them on this some more, and our moderator stipulated that a Member of Congress could not deliberately claim in a mail piece that he voted for something when he actually voted against it—or that the outcome of a Congressional vote was the opposite of what it actually was.

Still, half of these participants believed that their Member of Congress could use taxpayer dollars to send something that is factually incorrect. Here are some comments we heard about another piece, titled “Making Washington Work for You”:

“I just glanced at the front and then immediately went to the content. Because it was something that affects me directly, I read it. I’d probably doubt the accuracy of it, and I’d go somewhere else to verify it.”—Sara, moderate conservative, Raleigh

“It’s not about whether or not I agree, it’s inaccurate...Politicians have the right to produce materials for their constituents based on truth that they perceive. But inaccuracy, that’s a waste of taxpayer dollars.”—Susan, moderate liberal, Raleigh

You are always best off citing sources viewed by constituents as unbiased, such as the Congressional Budget Office. Here are some things we heard about a mailing called the “2009 Annual Congressional Report”:

“It would be nice if it said where you can get more specific information, possibly from an unbiased source? You know, if they have nothing to fear...”—Jennifer, moderate liberal, Raleigh

“I like that it quotes the CBO. The Congressional Budget Office, they are bipartisan. I don’t think you could get more objective than that.”—Brian, moderate liberal, Raleigh

Finally here is a comment we heard about a mailing about the national debt:

“When I first looked at this chart, it looks like a wild, exaggerated projection. But down at the bottom, it says Congressional Budget Office. But if it says that, you should have that in big letters”—Franklin, moderate conservative, Raleigh

7) Don’t skimp on quality in the name of fiscal discipline; save money by mailing smarter

Despite perceived concerns on the Hill about ostentation, constituents nonetheless expect professional-looking pieces of mail from their U.S. Representative in

Washington. In this era of fiscal discipline, Members should rely on other ways to save money than cutting corners on paper quality, design, or color. One way would be to send mail mainly to those more likely to read it (such as older constituents—see more, below), and another would be to send pieces that are smaller in size (such as glossy postcards, discussed above).

When one asks constituents what mail they prefer from their Member, they say they don't want a mail piece that looks as though it was designed by an amateur and copied on a Xerox machine.

One sharp-looking, glossy, four-color postcard we showed to focus group participants elicited the following comments:

“It looks official, because of the layout and maybe the [paper] material. The contact information's easy to find and it's aesthetically pleasing.”—Alexis, moderate liberal, Raleigh

“It clearly communicates who it's from and its purpose. It's very informative and makes good use of the space.”—Rita, moderate liberal, Raleigh

We asked our moderate liberal focus group respondents in suburban Philadelphia if the mailing were flimsy, would they be as likely to read it? More than half of the participants said that they would be less likely. Evaluating a 17" x 11" two-page bi-fold mailing on healthcare, printed on glossy card stock, respondents said the following:

“I like the quality of the paper. When you pick up the mail and you have all the other pieces in there, that one will stick out. If the paper is flimsy, I'd be less likely to read it.”—Michael, moderate liberal, suburban Philadelphia

“The colors really grab your attention.”—Mario, moderate liberal, suburban Philadelphia

“I think that if it came [on flimsier paper], it's more of a trash item.”—Dan, moderate liberal, suburban Philadelphia

Our moderate conservative group in suburban Philadelphia compared two similar mail pieces to one another and told us why they preferred one slightly over the other. One reason was the quality of the paper, and participants told us that they would have rated the non-glossy mailing higher if it had been printed on glossier stock.

“The [inferior] feel of the paper...the glossy versus the plain paper. You know those circulars I get from the grocery store? If it fell into that pile, I'd probably think [the Congressional mail piece on inferior paper] was

one of those without even looking at it.”—Jackie, moderate conservative, suburban Philadelphia

“I personally like the harder, stiffer paper. “—Timothy, moderate liberal, Raleigh

A few participants in the groups were still concerned about the cost of sending out mail items, but intimated they don't want to see a significant diminution in the quality of what Members produce:

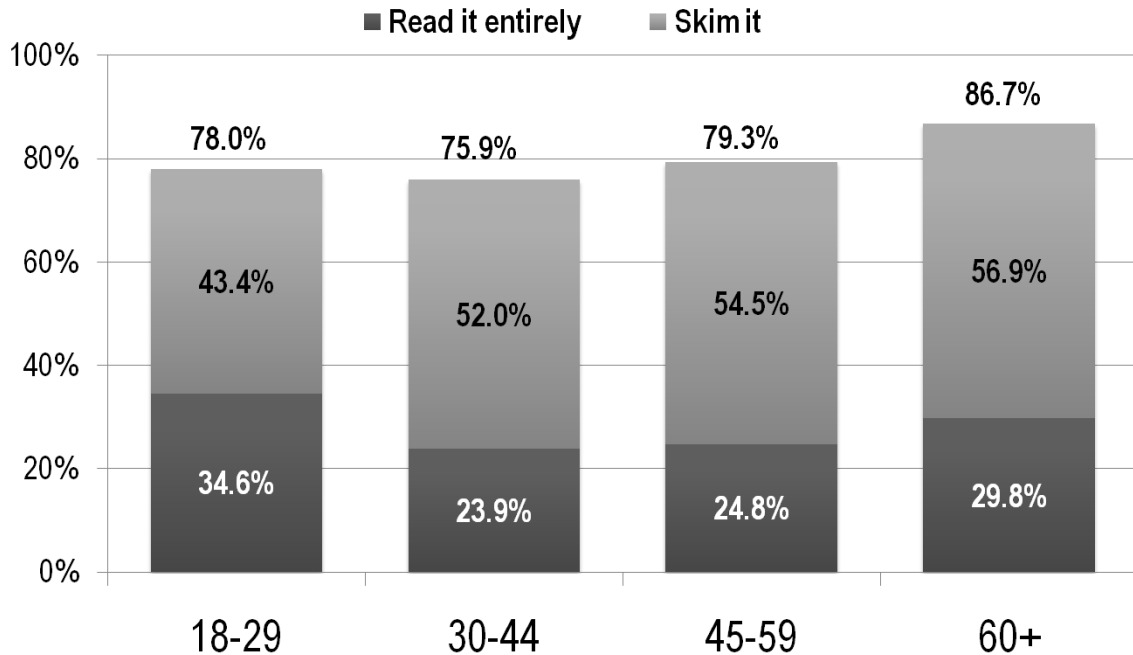
“They could get that higher quality [paper] but shorten it a little bit.”—Mario, moderate liberal, suburban Philadelphia

“There are several different versions in [the variety of mail shown to focus group participants]. There are two in particular that stuck in my mind that were done very similar to like a Kinkos style. Now I've done professional printing before, they could've taken that approach the same way, using not a high stock quality, go to the next lesser down, spend 10 cents less, and still get the same end result of quality. You're paying not only 10 cents for the print, but another 15 cents for the weight in the paper stock. Thirty cents times the number of prints they make, it becomes quite costly.”—Christopher, moderate liberal, suburban Philadelphia

“I feel [that Members of Congress shouldn't be sending beautiful four-color pieces], because I think they're over-spending [by] taking the top quality of something.”—Debbie, moderate liberal, suburban Philadelphia

8) Older constituents are more likely to actually read what you mail—be kind to them and ditch the small font sizes

Our survey showed that older constituents are more likely to read or skim Congressional mail that is sent to them than younger constituents are. We asked in our survey: “When you receive an unsolicited piece of printed mail from your Congressman, a piece that is NOT associated with an election campaign, do you usually read it entirely, skim it, or toss it out without really looking at it?” The responses were:



To that end, our focus group participants, both young and old, said that the font sizes on several of the mail pieces were too small to read:

“If you put six or seven items in something smaller than this, you’re going to have fonts that are so small, you won’t be able to read it.”—Ron, moderate conservative, Raleigh

“The only thing is that someone of my age would appreciate a little bigger font. It’s a little bit small print.”—Rita, moderate liberal, Raleigh

“I could barely read it, the print was so small, you have to really look close.”—Mario, moderate liberal, suburban Philadelphia

9) Constituent service is important, but don’t send an entire mailing about one specific service to the entire district

A mailer we showed to focus group participants on how to get a passport with the help of the Congressional office was not well received. Only 37.5% of the respondents said they would be very likely to read a four-color, 8.75" x 12" passport renewal alert printed on glossy card stock.

Our focus group participants felt that the passport renewal alert mailing was a low priority issue and the mailer was a waste of taxpayer money.

“Of all the issues they choose to talk about that are important in the district, this is what they go for?”—Clay, moderate liberal, Raleigh

“It seems like a wasted issue. Why would you spend money sending something like this out, when you have other issues that affect everybody? You have what, 3 or 4% of the population that are traveling outside the country?”—Ed, moderate conservative, Raleigh

“It’d actually anger me. I’d actually call in. It’s not the government’s job to make sure Stella can get her groove back in a foreign country.”—Judd, moderate liberal, Raleigh

Keep in mind: Constituents told us they assume that if they are getting a particular mailing, every household in the district is also getting that same mailing. When asked, all of our focus groups were in agreement that the mailings were probably not targeted to specific households in the district. For example, the idea that the Congressman would send a letter about the PUPS Act only to dog owners seemed unlikely to them.

10) Finely-targeted proactive mail allows Members to tell a nuanced story to key audiences that might otherwise be overlooked

It used to be that targeting by Congressional offices was limited to sending mail pieces to very large constituencies, such as seniors and veterans, if they were already tagged in the office’s database because of prior contact. That limited view of targeting has expanded remarkably in recent years, and Members’ offices are becoming increasingly sophisticated in their use of micro-targeting to reach larger numbers of ever-narrowing categories of constituents—including constituents who had never contacted them in the past.

For the purposes of this study, we used the text from two narrowly-targeted letters sent by actual Members of Congress and converted them into letters sent on Congressional letterhead by our faux Congressman, Michael Adams. We told survey respondents to assume that the locations referenced in the letter were in their own Congressional district.

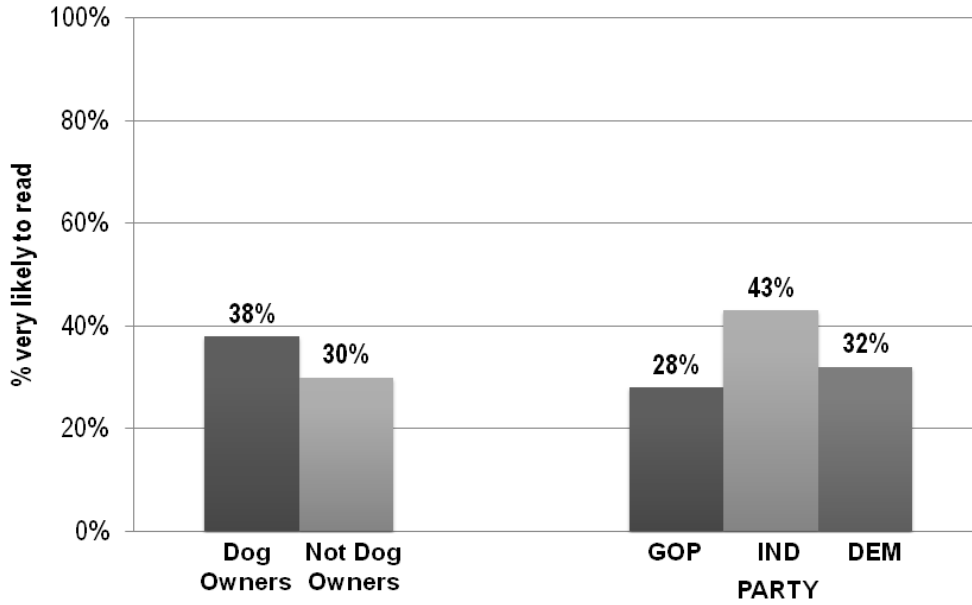
The first letter, two pages long, was in support of the PUPS Act, which is designed to close a loophole in Federal law that allows “puppy mills” to avoid what Adams terms “reasonable regulation.”

In the above section of the report, several focus group participants objected to the letter’s length, particularly when compared to one-page letters. Setting that objection aside, let’s consider other critiques of the mailing by different sub-groups. We discovered in our survey, for example, that while these letters were likelier to be read by dog owners—the audience targeted in realty by the Congressman who wrote the

original letter—than non-dog owners, the letter was even more likely to be read by Independents:

PUPS Act Mailing

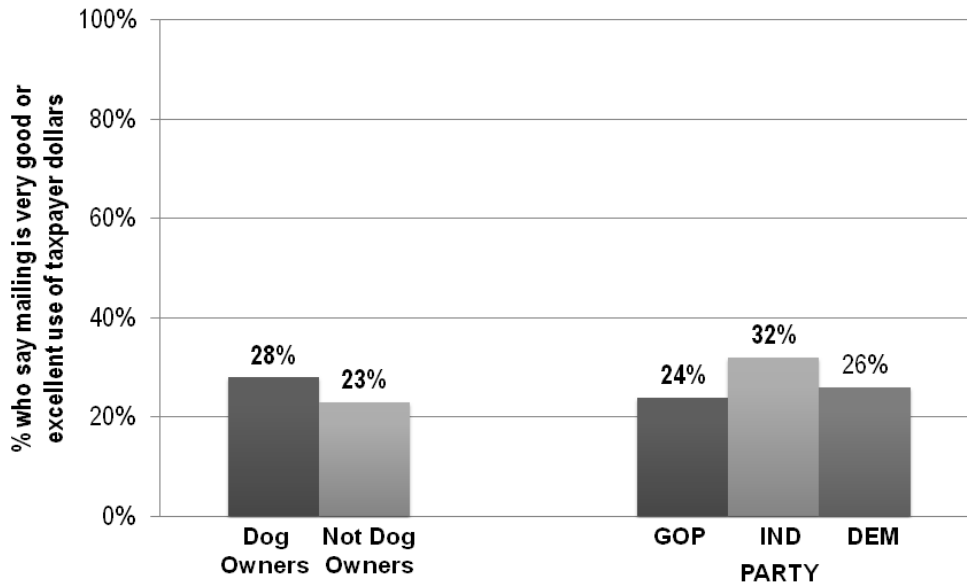
% very likely to read



Furthermore, a higher percentage of Independents consider this Adams letter to be a very good or excellent use of taxpayer dollars than the dog owners:

PUPS Act Mailing

% who say mailing is very good or excellent use of taxpayer dollars

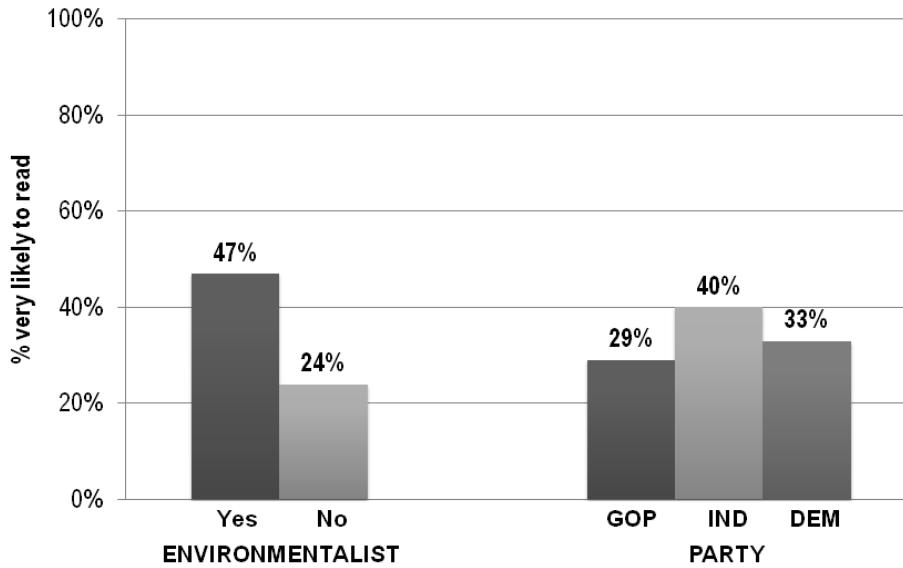


The second two-page letter on Congressional letterhead we included in our survey was also sent by an actual Member of Congress to donors to environmental causes who live in the district. We altered this letter to make it from Adams as well; it discusses the topics of “preserving farmland,” “preserving history,” “protecting watersheds,” and “protecting the environment.”

With this mailing, the reaction was pronouncedly positive for the intended audience, far more than for the dog owners in the PUPS Act mailing. Notice in the charts below the huge difference between those who consider themselves environmentalists versus those who do not. Notice, too, the clear partisan leaning towards Independents in terms of “likelihood to read” the letter, and the leaning towards Democrats in terms of the mailing’s being viewed as a very good or excellent use of taxpayer dollars.

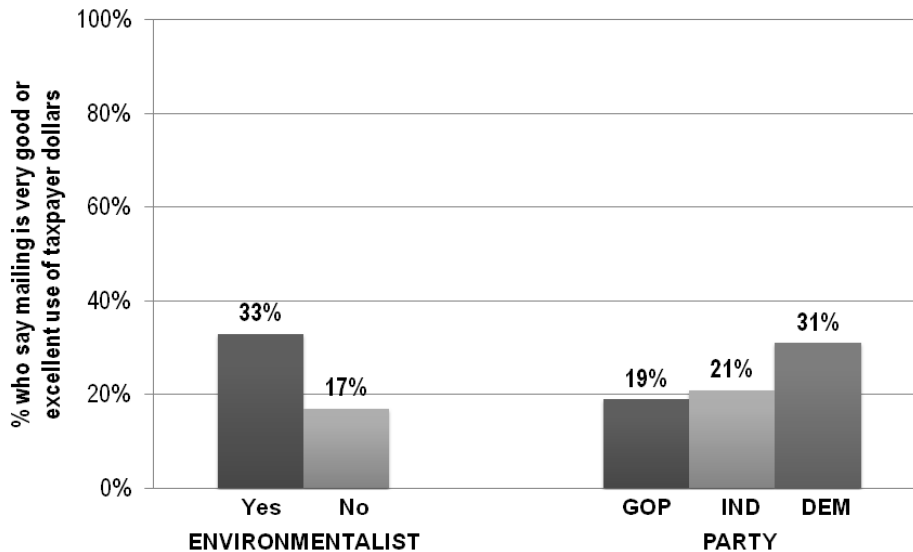
Environmental Mailing

% very likely to read



Environment Mailing

% who say mailing is very good or excellent use of taxpayer dollars



What is particularly intriguing about this feedback is that the actual environment letter was sent by a conservative Republican to his constituents. The survey

respondents did not know Michael Adams’s party affiliation, so that might have accounted for some of their reactions to it. When asked about this mail piece before they knew the sender’s political leanings, we heard from Raleigh Democrats:

“He’s bipartisan in the way he works. He comes across as very sincere.”—Susan, moderate liberal, Raleigh

“Even if you don’t agree with everything he says, you can still feel good about it.”—Clay, moderate liberal, Raleigh

“He seems passionate.”—Rita, moderate liberal, Raleigh

“I’m a Democrat and I would vote for this guy.”—Susan, moderate liberal, Raleigh

Once our focus group moderator inserted into the discussion that the Member is a conservative Republican, the Democrats did not dismiss the letter’s contents, though some were surprised to hear that information. Rather, some indicated they would want to read more about the Member’s position on the issue to make sure the information in the letter was accurate.

Overall, we heard that what accounted for the Democrats’ warm reaction to this letter was that it talked about their local area (one that would be familiar to them, assuming they lived in Adams’s district); there’s a slight bit of personal detail about why the issue matters to the Member personally; the Member sounds sincere in what he’s describing; he takes the issue and raises it above politics—he makes it about the quality of life in the community; he makes a point of showing a willingness to be bipartisan (at least on this issue); and he relates the environmental issue to other issues—ones that give the letter a wider resonance.

11) The younger the constituent, the less bothered they are by the concept of targeting

One very interesting—and surprising—finding arising from the focus groups discussions about the targeted mail pieces is that most of the respondents did not realize that they were being targeted, nor were they particularly curious as to why they might be receiving a certain issue-specific letter.

We heard several comments about how everyone’s information is available all over the Internet, so they are accustomed to having marketers know a lot about them. It was only the older participants, who can remember a time when personal information was considered private, who expressed stronger reservations.

For example, we heard from older moderate Democrats:

“I would feel better about it if I knew he had gotten this information because I had sent back a card or I gave him my interests so he knew I’d be interested in this, and then specifically sent it to me.”—Connie, moderate liberal, Raleigh

“I don’t think there is a way he could get that information [about my being a dog owner] and not creep me out.”—Rita, moderate liberal, Raleigh

During our discussion with Republican voters in Raleigh, we asked about the idea of a Member of Congress’s sending a mailing on such a narrow topic as the PUPS Act. We heard:

“I’d assume the humane society sold my name and data and address.”—Kelly, moderate conservative, Raleigh

We then asked what it says about a Congressman who would do this type of targeting. We heard from this group that “It would tell me he’d done his homework,” and “He’s put in the extra effort.”

The moderator pushed harder on these Republicans, and said, “I’m not hearing ‘big government is intruding, they’re targeting me and invading my privacy.’ Why is that?” The reply:

“Our privacy is already invaded. I don’t agree that companies should sell our information, but it’s already out there.”—Franklin, moderate conservative, Raleigh

At another point in the session, Franklin said, “If I got a letter saying, ‘I’m your congressman. I know you’re a student. Here’s a bill that will affect you and here’s how I voted,’ that’d be like the coolest thing I’ve ever gotten. So [the Member] figured out who his students are, knows [how legislation] is going to affect them, and mailed to them.”

Printed Mail: Best Practices

BEST PRACTICES	Do	Don't
Length of proactive mail pieces	<i>Keep it brief; don't say in two (or more) pages what can be said in one.</i>	Make constituents do homework—and lots of reading is interpreted as homework.
Size of four-color mail pieces	<i>Produce postcards that are approximately 8" x 5", or mailers that fold into approximately that size when mailed.</i>	Send any postcards that could double as a placemat, or be easily misconstrued as campaign literature because of its size.
Soliciting feedback	<i>Make sure to always ask for feedback, and explicitly promote various communication venues where constituents can learn more about your work and comment on it, such as Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, etc.</i>	Convey the message that you're more interested in talking than listening.
Mail content	<i>Keep it fact-based, and be sure to footnote statistics so they are more likely to be believed.</i>	Rely on fluff; constituents see right through it and won't bother to read it. Also, don't send an entire mail piece to promote a stand-alone constituent service.
Quality of look and feel of mail	<i>Make sure all mailings look professional and worthy of your office. This means using high quality paper, and sharp but simple designs.</i>	Skimp on paper or design quality in the name of budget consciousness. Save money instead by producing smaller mail pieces and ones focused on key audiences. Also, keep the fonts large enough for seniors to read.
Telling your story more selectively	<i>Use advanced data-mining tools to highlight how your specific votes in Congress advance the concerns of modest-sized constituent groups, based upon their consumer behavior and/or demographics.</i>	Rely solely on the database of constituents who reach out to you. Instead, go out proactively and build relationships with the district. They won't know what you are doing unless you tell them—continuously.