How to Succeed At QSLing "Without Really Trying"

Note: *Due to the popularity of some of eHam's older articles, many of which you may not have read, the eHam.net team has decided to rerun some of the best articles that we have received since eHam's inception. These articles will be reprinted to add to the quality of eHam's content and in a show of appreciation to the authors of these articles.*"

Updated January 2003

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This article is based on a post to the DX QSL reflector in May 2002. It was updated for publication in the June 2002 issue of the *WASHRag*, the newsletter of the Wireless Association of South Hills, Inc. N3SH/WA3SH of Pittsburgh, PA. This update was done at the request of a QSL Manager who wanted to pass these tips on to individuals who needed assistance in sending and receiving QSL cards. Permission is granted to anyone who would like to reprint this for their own use or in their club newsletter providing the author (WN3VAW) and sources (DX QSL Reflector, **WASH**Rag, and *eHam.net*) are properly credited.

In recent years I've had very good success in getting my DX QSL cards answered, both from domestic and overseas managers and from the DX stations direct. High return QSL rates are sometimes difficult to achieve, especially amongst those amateurs who are just starting out and haven't learned all of the "tricks" that sometimes help get one that rare or wanted QSL card when others fail at the task.

Several new amateurs asked for advice on how to succeed. While I don't pretend to know all of the answers, here's what I tell them:

1. Learn patience. Cards do not return overnight. Expect a *minimum* of 10 - 14 days for domestic cards and 4 - 6 weeks for overseas cards. 6 weeks for a domestic card and 3 months for overseas is not uncommon. In the cases of a major DXpedition, expect 4 to 6 to 9 months for a return, since most of the time (and there are exceptions) cards are not printed until after the DXpedition returns and the managers literally have tens of thousands of QSL requests to check through.

2. Listen, listen, and listen some more. Listen to the DX station when you work him/her, and before and after. With the exception of contest environments when serious contesters are trying to maximize QSO rates, take a few moments before and after your QSO. Listen specifically for any instructions the DX has regarding QSL'ing. Sometimes different managers handle different modes or bands (such as 6 meters). Sometimes a guest operator (for example, the 2002-03 4U1ITU operations by K1ZZ) will QSL direct or have his/her own manager.

   Also, if you have packet or can check an Internet packet node, check the cluster to see if anything has been posted.

3. Subscribe to some of the free (OPDX, 425 DX, etc) or pay (Daily DX, Weekly DX, QRZ DX?) DX e-mail information services as they usually have complete and detailed QSL information.

4. Learn where the Internet search engines for QSL information are and use them. (I highly recommend PATHFINDER, located on the www.qsl.net servers.) But keep in mind that sometimes the wrong information or out of date information gets listed even in the best of them.

5. Make sure the DX station has your call correct, which can sometimes be difficult in a big pileup. It's been suggested that if you are in doubt, log the calls of the stations worked before and after you so that you have some "proof" you made the Q & the call in the log is busted. Obviously, you can't QSL the station if you're not in the log!

   And it should go without saying, make sure you have the DX call correct also! Too often, someone sees a spot for a rare DX, jumps on the frequency, beats the pileup, and logs the call wrong because the call posted on the cluster has a typo or some other error. Go back to rule 2: listen, listen, & listen some more!

6. Use "security" envelopes, even domestically or wrap the contents of the envelope in a thin blank sheet of paper, or both. Cuts down on potential theft and the sheet of paper "smooths" the envelope out a little so that there's less chance of postal machinery snagging on and destroying an envelope.

   I have begun in recent months to use computer-generated QSL cards, usually taking my contest logs and manipulating the data (beats writing out 500 cards by hand.) Most of the pre-perforated, 4 to a sheet card stock you can buy (Avery 8387 Ink Jet Postcards) will not fit a #10 envelope. I recently "discovered" that Staples carries the slightly larger #12 Business Envelope, 100 to a box. It may cost a little more than buying two boxes of 40 or 50 #10 Security envelopes, but it's well worth it - and they are usually manila, so they are security envelopes to boot. And unlike the 6 x 9 or larger clasp envelopes, or the "bubble pack" envelopes, the #12s run through a standard ink jet printer with little or no problems, so you can make them look professional.

7. Minimize use of call letters on the envelope. You're usually OK on envelopes going to stations or managers in the US, Canada, and most of Europe. But the sad fact is that there are way too many areas of the world where people handling the envelopes covet cash, and have learned that call letters indicate an amateur radio related piece of mail, like a QSL card request with dollars and/or IRCs.

   Consider having your envelopes printed professionally with a return address, or use a good quality laser or ink jet printer to print them on the fly. Consider strongly making them look like a professional letter, not a personal one. Some people have gone so far as to make them appear to be "junk" mail (as in "congratulations! You may have won two IRCs by opening this letter!" - ok, only Ed McMahon could get away with that one.)

   If you're not going to fake a company name and you're married, use your spouse's name (as in "John & Jane Smithe" not "John Smithe"). Again, makes it appear to be something other than a QSL request.

   Use your home printer to print the mailing address right on the envelope. Hand-written addresses do not look professional. Mailing labels sometimes look like junk mail, but do not look professional.

   Tape envelopes shut. Prevents humidity and other factors from "accidentally" opening sealed envelopes.

   Some people recommend cutting a corner off the envelope so that the contents of the envelope can be inspected. That one has never done much for me, but many swear by it.

8. Learn patience.

- Make sure your address is complete on your enclosed SAE or SASE. If sent domestically, make sure you have enough postage on the SASE. If sent internationally, don't forget to include "USA" as some DX get quite annoyed having to add that.

  If you have them, affix a USPS Label 19B sticker to the SAE (that's the current official Air Mail label). You can get them free for the asking at most post offices, assuming the clerk isn't in a bad mood.

- If you print your SAEs, and your software permits it, include the mailing bar code. Use the ZIP+4 number if you know it (and you should). Also, check your mail – especially bulk mail or commercial mail. Seems to be an extra two digits added on to the bar codes that the USPS doesn't advertise (for example, mine is 15234-2317+71). Anything that helps route that envelope back to you, use! (See also 5b above)

- To IRC or not IRC, that is the question? Most DX will either not respond to your direct request, or will reply only via the bureau, unless you include something to help cover the cost of postage. Sometimes they request more than is absolutely necessary for return postage; in some cases, this helps cover miscellaneous costs including power and food. There have always been rumors about certain managers getting "rich," which is beyond the scope of this article. Be so as it may, follow the DX's instructions if any as to IRC or Green Stamp (US Dollars) quantities or preferences.

  Some areas of the world prohibit their citizens to possess US or other foreign currency. It is usually a bad idea to send Green Stamps to these areas.

  Banks in some areas of the world charge large fees to convert US or other currency to theirs. So the DX may have to wait until s/he has enough on hand to make the conversion and related costs worthwhile.

  Some areas of the world do not accept IRCs or no longer accept the older IRCs (including the green "no expiration" ones we've used for years), a list that has been growing in recent months, Universal Postal Union rules not withstanding (some countries do not belong to the UPU). In these cases, US $ makes more sense.

  In some areas, a dollar buys more air mail postage than an IRC. In other areas, the opposite is true. And some places want more than one IRC to cover air mail back to the US. How do you find out? Ask questions on one of the many DX & QSL reflectors. Also check out the fine IRC chart that Bill W9OL has at http://www.qsl.net/w9ol/ircchart.txt

  Where do you get an IRC? You can buy them at the Post Office, currently for $1.75 each – if you can find a Post Office that knows what to do with them and a clerk who can be bothered (IRCs are a little arcane and many don't know how to deal with them, another matter outside the scope of this article). DON'T. Instead, contact a domestic QSL manager (I usually get mine from Steve KU9C, occasionally from others including Joe W3HNK and Bernie W3UR) and buy them from him. Why? Because they can only redeem them for an $.80 stamp. So buy them for about a buck each – saves you $.75 per, and lets them buy those stamps with a little extra. (What happens to that little extra? Pays for the QSL card printing, covers bureau postage for the manager, covers

other misc. costs and essentials for the DX. Ask the manager in question what he does with it, he'll tell you.)

New or old IRC? The new ones are huge (they won't fit into a #10 envelope with folding!), so in the past I recommended not using them unless absolutely necessary. But since more and more administrations no longer will accept the older "green" ones, you may have no choice. But don't fold them unless absolutely necessary. Check into #12 envelopes since the new IRCs don't fit the #10's.

Don't use the (older still) brown "surface" IRCs. They were officially phased out years ago, and their redemption value to the post office(s) are minimal if anything. So what to do with them? Believe it or not... sell them to a collector on eBay for top dollar!

If you're going to send a green stamp, try and get "fresh" ones from your local bank branch. Again, some foreign administrations or banks can be funny about that, they dislike handling older bills. If two GSs are needed, get a $2 bill; same value, less bulk, less weight, and very rarely in circulation so they're almost always in good shape.

Have you considered using an outgoing QSL service? Les, WF5E, runs a very successful one (and there are others, but I've used Les a lot lately). He charges a flat fee of $.25 per outgoing card, which can add up to a significant savings when you're dealing with a lot of cards - and he takes checks, too. The only "catch" is that you have to have envelopes on file at your local Incoming QSL bureau - Les sends out the cards to the DX stations in bulk, gets them back, and then distributes them through the bureau system. Keeps everyone's costs reasonable, and as long as you're not in a super great hurry to get the card back, you will get it, eventually. Expect a 4 to 6 month turn around when using a service like this.

9. Learn some more patience.

10. If possible, try not to use commemorative stamps internationally. (Even though the current $.60 & $.80 air mail stamps are a little "flashy," they're also pretty common). Some of the envelopes stolen in transit are swiped for the stamps, especially the "rarer" domestic stamps sent domestically.

    Reality is that there are some DX that either have most of their mail intercepted or are IRC/GS collectors. So don't be afraid to ask first. But don't be disappointed if some of these never come through, or if they reply years later through the bureau. Some have reasons; they might be good ones (which is no excuse, though). Some are just...what they are.

11. Learn yet more patience.

12. If I make a mistake on the QSL card I'm printing or writing, I destroy it and make a new one. Some people will mark it up and send it anyway. Most cards that are saved for awards purposes can't be used if they appear to be "altered" so they're not worth the bother.

13. Keep your log in UTC time (AND DATE) not local time. Today, 99%+ of all amateurs who QSL keep their logs in UTC (GMT to the old fashioned!). If the DX has to spend a lot of time looking for your call and confirming the data, you may go to the bottom of the pile or the "hospital" pile. It does no good to get your card in first if it has a problem causing the DX to deal with it last!

Don't forget to keep the year straight come the first of January! Some DX understand, but others will be very strict. Wrong year = No QSL card!

14. Don't give up. Things happen. It took me 12 years, for example, but I finally tracked down and got my EL7X card – the original request had been lost during civil disturbances, and it was a long time until I found that the amateur had escaped and was still alive AND still had his logs. Some Silent Key logs are lost, but others are put in a family member's or a QSL manager's hands and cards can still be obtained. ASK if in doubt.

15. Patience!

Some things that I know others do that I don't:

- I have hardly ever bothered with the flimsy light-weight air mail envelopes. They made sense when air mail was weighed by the nd sometimes the cost of buying the envelopes and handling them is more than the cost of postage. Those who swear by them will no doubt disagree with me on that!

- I also do not bother trying to buy foreign postage to send on an SASE. You pay a premium for it, and you may not always send the right amount or the right stamps (some countries use different stamps for domestic and international mail). Especially with the (2002) conversion to Euros in much of Western Europe, again it strikes me as more hassle than it's worth.

- I also rarely bother trying to get foreign currency to mail with my QSL requests; again, trying to find it is a hassle, and then there are costs above and beyond the value of the currency itself. However, when I have received local currency from a DX station, I save it and use it for the next envelope & request I send to that entity.

- Some people have success with 6 x 9 manila envelopes. I used to use them for a particular QSL card I generate from my computer that won't fit a #10. Also, some people get odd sized envelopes from the card stores (usually leftovers after a big holiday). Nice idea – but they don't fit my printer. I have also been hassled at the Post Office by ill-informed clerks that equate the 6 x 9 envelope with a "package" that has to be screened by Customs before leaving the country.