

## **Using a Founding Father to Promote the Art of Letter-Writing**

*Stuart Elliott*

HBO and the Postal Service are joining forces for the first time to co-sponsor a multimillion-dollar multimedia campaign that is intended to evoke the pleasures of sitting right down and writing yourself — or anyone — a letter.

The campaign promotes "John Adams," a seven-part mini-series scheduled to begin on the cable network on Sunday. The campaign includes television, print, online, retail and promotional elements.

The campaign, by the Civic Entertainment Group in New York, seeks to demonstrate what it calls the "power of the letter," which is also the U.R.L. for a special Postal Service Web site that is a central element of the campaign ([thepoweroftheletter.com](http://thepoweroftheletter.com)).

The Web site is the work of AKQA, which was recently named digital agency of the year by the trade publication Adweek. A Web site from HBO devoted to the mini-series ([johnadams08.com](http://johnadams08.com)) also directs visitors to the Postal Service's letter site.

The campaign also appears on the main Postal Service Web site ([usps.com](http://usps.com)) as well as on placards and posters in post offices around the country.

Even the cancellation marks on envelopes and the sales receipts given by postal employees carry the address of the special Web site, along with a quotation from Adams: "Let us dare to read, think, speak and write."

For those of you worried that the cost of the campaign — estimated at \$5 million to \$10 million — may be a reason that the Postal Service will soon raise the price of a first-class stamp, fear not. HBO, part of Time Warner, is paying the bill.

The inspiration for the campaign — and the Postal Service's involvement — is the reputation of Adams and his wife, Abigail, as prolific letter writers. They exchanged more than 1,100 letters from 1762 until 1801, dating from their courtship through his presidency.

Indeed, in the Broadway and movie versions of the musical "1776," the songs sung by the actors playing John and Abigail Adams were based on the contents of their letters.

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The campaign is indicative of a couple of trends. One is the growing willingness of marketers — including media companies like Time Warner, which make entertainment products — to look beyond conventional outlets for their sales pitches.

The campaign to encourage viewers to watch "John Adams" includes commercials on television and in movie theaters, as well as outdoor advertising and newspapers ads.

But the Postal Service offered an "opportunity to extend communication beyond traditional advertising platforms, on a scope and scale that's pretty broad and impressive," said Zach Enterlin, vice president for advertising and promotion at HBO in New York.

"We have a presence in almost 13,000 locations," he added, referring to the posters and placards in the post offices. And the cancellation marks promoting the mini-series are to appear on more than three billion pieces of mail.

Mr. Enterlin played down any perceptions of the Postal Service as old-fashioned or low-tech, calling it "a national institution with a great legacy."

The other trend that the campaign epitomizes is the increasing eagerness of organizations like the Postal Service to consider teaming up with corporate partners.

For decades, such deals were off-limits, particularly when the Postal Service was part of the presidential cabinet as the United States Post Office.

More recently, the Postal Service has affiliated with marketers that include Pillsbury, for a tie-in campaign selling holiday stamps, and the filmmaker George Lucas, for a "Star Wars" campaign that featured mailboxes designed to look like R2-D2.

The partnership with HBO "is the most elaborate" of those the Postal Service has agreed to, said Joyce Carrier — yes, that is her real name — who is the manager for channel advertising at the Postal Service in Washington.

"The more we thought about it, the more we thought, 'This is a great opportunity,' " she added. "HBO is a wonderful brand and the cast is first-class."

Pun intended. (The cast of "John Adams" is led by Paul Giamatti as Adams and Laura Linney as Abigail. Other cast members include David Morse, Sarah Polley and Tom Wilkinson.)

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The emphasis of the campaign on letters is welcome, Ms. Carrier said, because "we don't spend a lot of our marketing dollars on first-class mail."

"We're realists," she added, acknowledging that "obviously, letter-writing is something that has taken a back seat" to digital communications.

Yet "letter-writing is an art," Ms. Carrier said. " 'L.O.L.' is not something you're going to stick in a drawer."

To introduce or reintroduce computer users to the delights of nondigital expression, visitors to poweroftheletter.com can be connected to cardstore.com, a Web site owned by a company called ink2, where they can choose from one of six free greeting cards bearing quotations from John or Abigail Adams.

After a card is created and customized online, it is mailed to the computer user, who can write a message inside and send it to the intended recipient.

"People can write letters to one another and follow in John and Abigail's footsteps," said Stuart Ruderfer, chief executive at Civic Entertainment.

He also praised the Postal Service executives for agreeing to help HBO promote the mini-series in such a big way.

"Given the right idea, the right campaign, the Postal Service has demonstrated they're willing to push the envelope, no pun," Mr. Ruderfer said. (What is it about mail that inspires people to offer so many plays on words?)

HBO will begin "John Adams" with two back-to-back episodes. The remaining five episodes are to be shown each Sunday from March 23 through April 20. Each episode will be rerun several times, as is the practice at HBO. They will also be shown on a sibling network, HBO2.

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