

Universal Theory of the Hobby...Well, Part of It

A collector sent me an e-mail in late July commenting on the dismal search for traders and the lack of responses from ads, even when the ads were for common covers, and he asked me what was going on. Well...

As editor for the national hobby organization, I have to keep my finger on the pulse of the hobby. In order to do my job, I have to have some idea of what's gone on, what's going on, and what's going to go on. Consequently, I maintain contact with a lot of collectors and club officers around the country, and I've also maintained statistics on various aspect of the hobby for the last 20 years. This gives me something of the 'big picture,' although how accurate it is remains to be seen.

So, here's my take on the collector's query on the general lack of response from fellow collectors:

First, the pool of possible responders (people in the organized hobby) has shriveled from some 4,000 in 1985 to 2,376 in 2001 to 849 as of this writing.

The possible responders shrink even further when you consider the club you're advertising with. *The RMS Bulletin* has a readership of several hundred; the few large regional clubs have 100+ readers, and the rest of the clubs have anywhere from 15-80. Even advertising with multiple clubs doesn't significantly add much, since there is so much member duplication throughout the hobby.

When it comes to trading, the rising cost of postage has deterred many collectors. When I came into the hobby in 1983 a first-class stamp was 20¢; now it's 49¢, soon to be 50¢+...and the envelope, all the while, still holds the same 12-14 covers.

Also with reference to trading, not only has the number of collectors shrunk, but it's shrunk even further by the very nature of who's left...almost exclusively veteran collectors. Veteran collectors typically stop trading eventually when, as their collections grow, they find they're getting fewer and fewer useable covers from trades, and they can no longer justify the time, effort, and expense for the meager return. Meanwhile, the few newer collectors have trouble coming up with suitable trading material.

Then, there's the specific wants of the collector. If you regularly read the classified ads in any club's bulletin, you'll notice immediately that the wants are almost always very specific: "WANTED: yellow toads sitting on the bow of the Titanic." Not only are most possible responders immediately eliminated, but even if someone has those covers, he's certainly not going to be a steady trader. And it gets even worse if the someone has very specific wants in return.

I should note, in all fairness, however, that the collector looking for yellow toads isn't looking for a steady trader. He's looking for those hoped for isolated caches of such covers here and there...which is why it's worth his while to run classified ads.

There are a myriad of other factors, as well, no doubt. Some people don't read the ads; some people are just apathetic; a considerable number of people who appear on club rosters are just 'part-time' collectors and/or are in the hobby mainly for the social aspects; some are hospitalized or otherwise incapacitated; some are family members of a collector and really don't collect; etc.

So, in closing...Yes, Virginia, there *is* a Santa Claus...but you have to look really, really hard for him!