Strategies For Organizing Large Collections

You're in a hobby where you're going to be dealing with *thousands, tens of thousands, perhaps hundreds of thousands,* or in a few cases, *millions* of different items. Hence, one quickly learns that organization is a must! Thus, allow me to impart the wisdom gained through my years of experience...and all the mistakes I've made.

When you decide on collecting a certain category, you already know ahead of time whether it's a numerically small or large category, irrespective of how many such covers you start out with. For example, there are 8,000+ known Cameos, over 27,000 Gas Stations, and 100,000+ Restaurants. With categories such as these, you need to plan ahead. Whether putting your covers in albums, trays, or whatever, if all goes well, your collection is going to grow...and grow...and grow. How do you organize those covers for speedy access to any specific cover?

Well, there is more than one viable solution. Let's take my Christmas collection as an example. When I started it many years ago, I had a couple of hundred covers. So, I organized them in an album according to *color*—all the red ones together, all the blue ones together, etc., which meant funneling all those covers into some 10 subcategories. That was rather attractive, and it worked...for awhile.

But, eventually my collection grew to thousands, and I found myself having to go through hundreds of red covers, looking for one specific red cover. And, the more the collection grew, the more cumbersome such searching became.

Eventually, I had to remove *all* my Christmas covers from their pages, completely resort them a different way, and put them back into their new pages (a very long and tedious process, but one that has continued to pay dividends ever since). I took all those covers and divided them by 1) state, and then 2) alphabetically. Thus, under my original *color* system, I had some 10 subcategories, but now I had 1,300!

This is a much more specific way of organization, and it enables you to find what you're looking for sooooo much easier and faster even though you have thousands of covers in that particular category. If I receive a Christmas cover in a trade from Johnson's Dairy in Minnesota, and I want to see if I need it or not, I can go right to my Christmas/Minnesota album, turn to the 'J's, and quickly look at a few pages, rather than paging through dozens of pages. *[I could have saved myself a lot of time and effort if I had just read this article when I first started collecting!]*

My Military collection affords us another example. I have that 1) by state, 2) then alphabetically by base/or city if there is no base, and finally 3) by branch of service. Again, that gives me literally thousand of subcategories, and that, in turn, allows me to locate any cover almost immediately. If I had thought about it at the time, I could have just as easily organized this collection 1) by branch, 2) then by state, and 3) then alphabetically by city...or, 1) by branch, 2) by state, and 3) by base or unit name.

But, none of this is set in stone. How about this? What about organizing all those Military covers simply in one *huge*, but still *specific* subcategory? Alphabetically, by base or unit name. Here, you'd only have one subcategory, but you could *still* quickly (well, *fairly* quickly) locate the cover of your choosing. Of course, in this instance, you'd *really* have to organize each cover alphabetically, not just all the R's together, then all the S's, etc, or you'd just be back to the same problem initially described above.

Alas, there *is* at least one disadvantage to *any* system you devise—there are *always* going to be at least a few covers that don't fit into any of your subcategories! Using our sample collections above, what are you going to do with the inevitable batch of covers that *have* no state? Or, no city? Or, no base/unit designation? Hmmm...

Well, I solve that one by simply fabricating a 'general' subcategory specifically for those covers, normally putting those covers at the front of the first album in that category. My Banks, for example: There are the nationals and others without any location. I put them alphabetically in front of my collection. Even if some previous collector has been nice enough to note the specific location on the back (say MN), I still put it in that 'no location' section...because if I put it in the MN section and two years later I get the same cover with no notation, it would go in the 'no location' section...thus giving me an unwanted dupe in my collection. Don't want that! You may find a completely different method that suits you just fine.

Here's a completely different, and surprisingly simple, organizational system (thanks to the late Warren Marshall, CA), and yet it's also the *most* cover specific system I've ever encountered—you simply put newly acquired covers in your collection's albums in the next available page slots/pockets where you left off before. Then, using a computer database, you add said covers to your running list of that collection's covers, noting exactly *where* that cover is (which page in which album). Anytime you want to find that cover, you simply punch up your database, click on your 'resort' option to alphabetize the list if it's not already alphabetized, and find the entry for the cover you're looking for. "Tanya's Tea Room"....*click!....click!*...album 26, p. 47...Voilá! You could even make it more specific yet by noting the slot/pocket number on the page (album 26, p. 47, #6).

The disadvantage of that system *[you knew there'd be one!]* would be that I would have to boot up my computer every time I wanted to find a cover, since I don't have my computer on all day, although I suppose I could load the database to my cell phone. That would be more convenient, but I hate typing txt on my cell phone...the keys are just too small! Also, I don't know how you would cope with adding a variation cover. I would want that cover right next to the similar cover in my albums, but that similar cover would have been an earlier entry, and thus would be on a different page, perhaps even in a different album. And, if you move the covers around so they *could* be next to each other, you'd have to go back and amend the database entries to show the new location...which would be a hassle. And, of course, there's all the ongoing data entries.

Plus, you'd lose the advantage of having similar covers all together. I collects Sets & Series, for example. If I used Warren's system, I wouldn't be able to see page after page of the same designs, etc. In my case, that would be a big negative anyway, but as an editor, if I need four Unicorn covers to run with an article, I know right where they all are, because they're all together.

But, perhaps an overriding advantage of such a system, though, for some collectors, would be an end, once and for all, to wasted page space. I assume, like myself, that most collectors leave empty spaces on pages for future acquisitions. With Warren's system, you'd no longer have to leave unused slots/pockets for anticipated future additions, because all additions simply go at the end of your last additions! What a blessing *that* would be! And, I could finally get maximum use out of those darn pages dedicated to "Q" and "Z" covers!

It's all a matter of ingenuity. Twelve collectors may well come up with twelve different solutions to the same problem. What organizational format you eventually end up with depends entirely on your own particular proclivities....But, *always try to plan ahead!*