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February 27, 2001

William J. Henderson  
Postmaster General  
United States Postal Service  
475 L'Enfant Plaza SW  
Washington, DC 20260

Dear Mr. Henderson:

According to *The New York Times*, the U.S. Postal Service is launching the "Postal Ad Network," to sell advertising space on mail trucks, mail collection boxes, in post offices lobbies and on the Postal Service Web-site.

This is not a high point in the history of the Postal Service. The Postal Service began in our country, among other things, as a way to keep families and communities together. Since the Continental Congress named Benjamin Franklin our first Postmaster General in 1775, the Postal Service has acted a kind of social glue, by helping Americans communicate with each other through the mail.

The Postal Service's ad plans show contempt for the communities it has helped to build. Postal Service trucks drive through nearly every neighborhood in America. By turning these trucks into rent-a-billboards, the Postal Service will infuse more crass commercialism into every community in our country.

Four states currently ban billboards, as do hundreds of cities and counties. By these local laws and ordinances, communities try to defend themselves against the commercialization of nearly everything, and the efforts of corporate advertisers to put an ad in front of our eyes at every waking moment. But under the Postal Ad Network plan, every time a Postal Service truck leaves the garage, it would violate the spirit of these ordinances and laws. Why is it your view that the Postal Service should ignore the wishes of citizens and their local governments?

Millions of Americans want to restore the bounds that used to keep the mercantile impulse in check. A 1999 poll by Louis Harris & Associates found that 39% of Americans have personally worried "a great deal" that advertising and commercialism are too intrusive in our society. Don't we have enough billboards already?

Still worse, under the "Postal Ad Network" the federal government and the Postal Service would tacitly endorse the products advertised. Why do you believe it is the proper role for the federal government to imply an endorsement of these commercial products?

The Postal Service has issued a policy regarding commercial advertising. Only advertising for commercial goods will be allowed. But the policy raises more questions than it answers. For example, how will the Postal Service select which products to promote? Will it adopt standards regarding the conduct of the corporations whose products it promotes? Will the Postal Service promote the products of serious polluters? Corporate felons? Monopolists? Tortfeasors? Violators of workplace health and safety laws? Corporate welfare recipients?

The Postal Service policy sets forth few limits regarding the extent and scope of advertising allowed. Are there any lines you won't cross? How much advertising will you allow? How far will you go? Will you sell naming rights to post offices? Will you have your delivery people to wear advertising on their uniforms? Will you sell the right to place corporate logos on postage stamps, as was discussed and rejected by the Postal Service in the Eighties?

Please consider what messages are precluded or crowded out. Our country is buried in sales pitches, to the great detriment of non-commercial messages. Is the best and most important message that the Postal Service has to offer -- to buy still more soda pop or credit cards? Don't more worthy messages exist? Why does the Postal Service want to promote merchandise instead of the voluntarism and community-building which was the hallmark of the first Postmaster General? Are you thinking about the public backlash that may occur?

We do not believe it is the proper role of the Postal Service or the federal government to act as a billboard for the marketeers of the land. Please stick to your core mission of delivering the mail. We are enclosing a report we published in 1983 on the Postal Service called The Postal Precipice for your interest.

Sincerely,

Gary Ruskin  
Director

Ralph Nader

cc: Senator Thad Cochran  
Senator Daniel Akaka  
Representative Dan Burton  
Representative Henry Waxman  
Representative Bernard Sanders  
Representative Jan Schakowsky  
Einar V. Dyhrkopp  
Robert F. Rider  
Alan C. Kessler  
Tirso del Junco  
Ned R. McWherter  
S. David Fineman  
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John F. Walsh  
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