
The Impact Of The Economy On the Hobby

“We live in momentous times!” There probably have been few, if any, times which weren’t momentous...in some ways...to some people. Still, it does seem that we, as a nation, have had more than our share of problems for at least the last few decades--illegal immigration, terrorism, wars...and the economy...just to name the more major current issues.

From a hobby standpoint, it is most definitely the latter that is having the greatest impact on us, the collectors. The state of our economy hits us more indirectly, in our endeavors, while assaulting us directly, through our wallets and purses. One could argue [*and I think I will*] that the economy, at least for us, started having its first major negative impact in the early-to-mid 1980s.

It was in the late 1970s-early 1980s that the major match manufacturers here began to fall...Lion, Ohio, and others...and finally the giant, Universal, in the mid-1980s. Foreign competition, soaring domestic labor costs, anti-smoking campaigns, declining orders...all spelled the end of the prolific manufacturing and easy availability of matchbooks and matchboxes in the country, and Canada, as well. That, alone, resulted in a rather enormous change.

Impact #1: The numbers, varieties, and availability of matchbooks greatly declined. Many to most businesses no longer put out the familiar baskets of free matchbooks on their counters and tables. Indeed, spurred on by rising match costs and anti-smoking campaigns and resulting legislation, many businesses ceased ordering matches altogether. Adding salt to the collectors’ wounds, this also meant the end to almost all of the industry’s Fancies. No more wonderful Jewels, Jewelites, Uniglos, Filigrees, Matchoramas, Cameos, Signets, and so on. True, occasionally, Atlas and Diamond still produce a Foilite-type here and there, but even most of those are a far cry from the quality we had come to know and expect from Universal’s Foilite covers.

Yet another resulting ripple from this has been the change within the hobby concerning the selling of covers. When I entered the hobby in 1983, there was little selling, and, although there were no actual bans on doing so, for whatever reason, it was definitely frowned upon and stigmatized. With the change of availability of matchcovers, however, all that changed. Dealers’ tables at swapfests and conventions, at least in some venues, are now actually being encouraged, no longer a ‘back street’ item to partake of in someone’s hotel room. And then, of course, there was the advent of ebay, which made selling and buying more popular in general and stirred interest among clubs and individual collectors in making their own web site auctions, as well.

Impact #2: Overall, there has been a resulting drop of some 60%-70% in the number of collectors in the hobby. A portion of that is simple attrition, as this hobby has always been top heavy with seniors while having few if any incoming youngsters. Most of the decline, though, is certainly due to the economy. On one side, we have fewer matchbooks out and available to attract non-collectors’ interest into becoming collectors, and, on the other side, we’ve seen all but the serious collectors fade away. True, we always *did* have a rather huge turnover among novice collectors anyway, but the economy has now basically wiped out what used to be a steady, even, and satisfactory flow of novices into the hobby. It should also be noted, that most, if not all other hobbies are experiencing the same problems... stamps, coins, etc. I’ve even heard my neighbor [*an impeccable source*] report that there is hardly anyone left in her local quilting club.

But, there are certainly other aspects of the economy that are also at work here. How about the *ever* escalating postal rates? That hits us twice...mail trades and club bulletins.

Impact #3: Trading has drastically declined. Of course, there are fewer collectors, now, to begin with, but each time postal rates increase, more collectors who trade decide that it's not worth it any longer.

Impact #4: Fewer bulletins, smaller bulletins. There are other factors operating here. Fewer members > less dues > less money to work with, for example, but higher and higher postal costs are definitely part of the formula. Each postal increase takes a bigger bite of your club's resources.

Impact #5: Higher club dues. Bulletins are the most costly item in most clubs' budgets. When postal rates go up, the immediate question is always, "Do our annual dues still cover our costs?" If not, that extra money has to come from somewhere. Raising dues is always an agonizing decision and a last resort, so some clubs, at least, have been able to make up the 'deficits' by scrambling to raise money in other ways...club auctions, etc. Still, if you compare club dues today to what they were in the mid-1980s, there's almost always quite a difference.

The latest economic factor, and in some ways the scariest, is skyrocketing gasoline prices. That affects everything...across the board...because, in one way or another, all products rely on gasoline to be moved. It also affects the cost and feasibility of travel, itself.

Impact #6: Prices go up...including hotel rooms, services, restaurant prices, etc. That impacts swapfests and conventions.

Impact #7: Fewer people travel to club meetings, swapfests, and conventions. I used to think nothing of driving 200 miles round trip to get to my Sierra-Diablo meetings, for example, but I couldn't possibly do that now. AMCAL was in May. I haven't missed one since 1984, but it's a 334-mile trip for me, round trip. I still went, but I certainly winced each time I had to stop at a gas station. Still, however (and somewhat ironically), the country's economy is doing very well in almost all other areas.

Assuming that all of the above economic conditions continue, or at least do not lessen, the hobby still has options to adapt, although there will be a hue and cry from certain quarters...because those options rely on technology. Bulletins can be electronic, thereby avoiding both printing and postal costs; even club meetings, if worse really came to worse [*and some would argue that it already has*], could be done in something such as a chat room format; swapfests and conventions...? It's certainly not an ideal solution in and of itself, for there will always be *potential* members who don't have the necessary technology and are never going to get it.

Thus, looking into the future, barring unforeseen major events, I believe the hobby may have to eventually, perhaps very soon, strike some sort of compromise adaptation to such economic forces. Bulletins, for example, could be switched to an electronic format with the option of a hard copy for any member who absolutely needed such. Sierra-Diablo has already been doing that with its roster for the last several years, and it's worked well...and the club has been spared the horrendous cost of mailing out all those rosters. Why not bulletins, as well? And some collectors eventually throw out their bulletins, anyway.

Sound radical? Perhaps, but 15 years ago who would have thought that everyone would be walking around with telecommunications gear draped around his head or a cell phone plastered to her ear? Who knows, perhaps we'll soon have home teleportation stations and the traveling problem will suddenly be solved!