

Global Addressing for the U.S. Business Mailer

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Editor

*Guide to Worldwide Postal-
Code and Address Formats*



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There are over 225 mail destination countries and territories in the world that create their own address criteria. Fortunately, all of the possible address variations when we include the different address types, such as 0street or post office box addresses, are not used. Among the existing variations, there are a number of commonalities but also some significant difference from the formats of U.S. addresses.

Of all the possible destinations, only six countries and one territory – Australia, Canada, Colombia, Lebanon, Somalia, and Taiwan plus Norfolk Island, which receives mail via Australia – use the same basic format for postal addresses as the U.S., with a state or province to the right of the city or town and the postal code to the right of that. (Some countries and U.S. territories use the services of the U.S.P.S.*) However, there are differences in the format of the postal code and the way in which the province is indicated.

While the addressing differences require some attention and thought, many U.S. companies of all sizes and types have successfully – and profitably – entered foreign markets. They mail regularly to other countries, sending sample, products, marketing material, and transactional letters. Most importantly, no company needs to solve the problems on its own.

Address differences lead to two basic problems for U.S. companies capturing international addresses and mailing to them. First, the form used to capture the address and the database in which it is stored must be adapted for foreign addresses. Second, printing a foreign address correctly on an envelope or label can be as much of a challenge as capturing and storing the address data. The fields that make up the address, particularly the postal code and the state or province, should be placed differently than in a U.S. address.

The correct formatting of the address and placement of the specific items does matter. Once mail reaches a destination country in those countries with automated sorting, incorrect placement of postal codes often means that the mail piece must be hand sorted with the delays that creates. In those countries without automated sorting, errors in the address format can more easily lead to misunderstanding the address and non-delivery. And, of course, if and when the item reaches the intended recipient, an incorrectly formatted address creates a poor impression of your company.

A few basic concepts and facts are helpful in understanding global addressing from a U.S. perspective.

Postal Codes

A postal code, called ZIP Code, PIN Code, PLZ, codigo postal, and many more names, is used in 174 countries. The codes vary from 3 to 10 characters and can include numbers, letters, dashes and spaces. They are most often placed to the *left* of the city or town name. But some countries place their code below or above the city name or between the city and the state or province.

Canada, the recipient of the most international mail from the U.S., uses the same address format as the U.S. but the postal code is made up of letters (A) and numbers (N) with a space: ANA NAN. The most common issue with mail to Canada is the lack of the space in the postal code. Make sure the code is formatted correctly for faster mail processing and delivery in Canada.

The remaining countries that use a U.S. compatible format illustrate the differences. Australia's postal code is 4 digits and mail to Norfolk Island goes via Australia, using a 4-digit code. Colombia has a 6-digit code but it is rarely used by residents. Lebanon uses a 9-digit code, including a hyphen (NNNN-NNNN) for urban areas and large volume users, with other areas and recipients using only 4 digits. Somalia officially has a 5-digit code but it is rarely used. And, Taiwan has a 5-digit code that is used regularly.

* American Samoa, Guam, Marshall Islands, Fed. St. of Micronesia, Northern Mariana Islands, Palau, Puerto Rico, and the U.S. Virgin Islands receive mail addresses in the same way as U.S. States with U.S.A. as the country of destination.

Postal codes in some countries are changed more frequently than they are in the U.S. Most often this is done to adjust for population changes or changes in delivery routes. The Netherlands and the United Kingdom both make these types of changes on a regular basis. Fortunately, address hygiene services are available for both of these countries and addresses can be corrected and updated.

States or Provinces

The equivalents of U.S. states in other countries also have many names – provinces, territories, districts, counties, islands, etc. These are used less often in postal addresses than postal codes with only 68 destinations using them out of the more than 225 that exist around the globe. The names of provinces are often spelled out in full. The province is most often placed to the right of or below the city or town. In a few countries, a province and a smaller district plus the town are used in addresses, adding at least one and sometimes two more lines to addresses in those countries.

To add further confusion to the province issue, seven countries that use them in *most* postal addresses do not use them for addresses in the capital or for major cities with Ireland and Russia being the most significant among them. At least one country, Azerbaijan, uses an "autonomy" for addresses in one area of the country but uses no province designation in most of the country.

Unlike in the U.S., many countries reorganize provinces in response to population growth or shift or administrative needs. This is done by perhaps 10 - 12 of the 68 countries that use provinces in their addresses, with a corresponding change in the affected address. Italy is one country to watch for this type of change, particularly outside the major cities.

Postal Codes, Provinces and Forms

Just because a postal code or province is officially part of the postal address doesn't mean that it is used regularly by residents. For postal codes, residents in 116 countries and territories use them frequently. The codes are used occasionally or rarely in the remaining 58 destinations. Provinces are used frequently in addresses by residents in 37 of the destinations where they are officially part of the postal address, leaving 32 destinations where the use is rare or occasional.

Requiring the postal code or the province on Internet forms leads to abandonment of the forms by residents of countries where they are not used or where they are rarely used.

Foreign addresses do not generally fit well into a database format for U.S. addresses. Some countries' addresses pose few or no problems other than the format of the postal code but other countries' addresses have too many lines or the lines are too long. Addresses from countries around the world in a sample of U.S. databases had an average of 5.9 lines and a maximum of 10. The average number of characters per line was 14.8, with a maximum of 54. (The average number of lines in a U.S. address in the sample was 4.1 with a maximum of 6 and the average characters per line was 18.9 with a maximum of 30.) While combining lines and abbreviating words are not sufficient to solve these problems, many U.S. firms of all sizes successfully capture and store addresses from other countries.

Changing Formats

As more countries establish better addressing systems, changes to the way addresses are formatted occur. Developed countries also make changes to their address formats as they adjust to more efficient sorting and delivery of mail and meet the requirements of government initiatives. Staying aware of these changes can make the difference between efficiently delivered mail that is well-received by the addressee and mail that is discarded or returned as undeliverable.

Here are some changes that may be of particular interest to U.S. mailers. South Korea replaced their "land-lot" system with a national building number and street name system. (International mail with land-lot addresses is still being delivered.) Ireland is scheduled to introduce a nation-wide code in the first quarter of 2015. The United Kingdom no longer uses its province equivalent in any postal

addresses, with the Royal Mail requesting that the designations be removed from addresses on mail items.

Help and expertise are available: Knowledgeable vendors and consultants, such as [GrayHair Software](#) and [GrayHair Advisors](#), can provide detailed information on the global addressing requirements while saving time and money for your company.

About the author

Merry Law, president of [WorldVu LLC](#), oversees their publications and worldwide marketing programs. She is editor of the authoritative *Guide to Worldwide Postal-Code and Address Formats* and author of *Best Practices for International Mailings*. Merry is a member of the Universal Postal Union POC Addressing Work Group and of the U.S. International Postal and Delivery Services Federal Advisory Committee. She can be contacted at mlaw@worldvu.com.

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