
Annual Report 2003

Office of the Ombudsman
at Canada Post





Michel Tremblay
Ombudsman

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Ms. Vivian Albo
Chair, Board of Directors
Canada Post

Dear Ms. Albo,

In accordance with the mandate established by the Board of Directors of Canada Post on November 13, 1997, I am pleased to submit my second annual report as Ombudsman covering the period January 1 to December 31, 2003.

Yours truly,


A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Michel Tremblay". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Michel Tremblay

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Mission
Statement 

“In a fair, unbiased and timely manner, the Ombudsman at Canada Post will independently review customer concerns unresolved by all other avenues offered by Canada Post to help improve Postal Service for all Canadians.”



Message from
the Ombudsman

The 2003 Annual Report is the second that I have the honour to present as Ombudsman at Canada Post.

5 The dispute resolution process depicted in this report has become an important source of information for Canada Post. Experience has shown that complaints received in our office likely reveal sources of dissatisfaction from customers that are often more significant than they appear at first glance. For every customer voicing his/her dissatisfaction, one must assume that there are dozens more who, having encountered similar problems, will never undertake to complain to Canada Post. My duty as Ombudsman is to ensure that Canada Post is informed of the nature of such complaints, their origin and the development of any trends. Executives at Canada Post have indicated their appreciation for this kind of information, which in turn allows them to take corrective action when appropriate.

Over the years, our office has developed and implemented a number of changes and refinements in practices and procedures to improve the quality of services that we provide to all Canadians. However, after nearly seven years of operations, it would seem appropriate to undertake an examination of the resources and tools at our disposal. For example, our aging data management capabilities should probably be adjusted to remain compatible with state-of-the-art systems recently purchased by Canada Post. Our operational practices and office infrastructure should also be re-examined to ensure that we remain an effective and efficient office of last resort for customers whose complaints have not been resolved by Canada Post. Our efforts in the coming year will be focused in that direction.

In addition to a series of statistical information concerning our operations, this report outlines a number of typical issues encountered during the course of the past year. We have selected mostly examples illustrating the positive results obtained through the mediation process.

In conclusion, I would be remiss not to mention how pleased I am with the achievements of my staff this year. They have consistently demonstrated a firm commitment to the values described in our mission statement: to independently review customer concerns in a fair, unbiased and timely manner. Their sustained effort contributed to the success of our office.

Michel Tremblay

Appeal Process

All Canada Post customers can express their dissatisfaction with respect to services received or products purchased in the postal network.

As it is customary in Ombudsman offices, the complaint process is relatively simple. When a customer has a complaint concerning the postal service, the first step is to bring it to the attention of the local post office or first point of contact with Canada Post. For example, when a post office is not easily accessible, the person delivering the mail can be the first point of contact.

If the issue remains unresolved, the customer must then submit it to the attention of the Customer Service Department at Canada Post at 1 800 267-1177: a toll-free number available to all Canadians. Customer Service will assign a file number and provide a response to the complaint.

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When customers are still not satisfied with the decision from Customer Service and wish to appeal to the Ombudsman, they must submit a *Request for Review* form and provide all the details of their dispute. Their signature on the form authorizes access to their customer service file at Canada Post. The *Request for Review* form may be obtained by calling the Office of the Ombudsman and is also available on our Website.

The Ombudsman's mission statement clearly states that customer concerns will be reviewed in a timely manner. As a result, a practice has been established and enforced over the years ensuring a response within twenty working days to all complaints submitted to the Ombudsman. It goes without saying that this self-imposed undertaking generates additional burden on the staff. It was nevertheless deemed that, after having been submitted through an already lengthy dispute process, customers expect and appreciate an expeditious review of their complaint by the Ombudsman.

All staff members are committed to honouring this twenty-day target. In certain instances, however, additional steps or unforeseen issues may unduly delay the response time and customers are advised accordingly.

Nevertheless, the staff in the Office of the Ombudsman can proudly claim to have lived up to this valued commitment in approximately 90% of the cases submitted to the attention of the Ombudsman in 2003.

The Office of the Ombudsman publishes an information brochure in which all its services, including the dispute resolution process, are clearly described. This brochure is available in all postal outlets across the country and on our Website.

Some Issues

Case 1

This case highlights the valuable mediation role of the Office of the Ombudsman at Canada Post, which resulted in a win-win situation.

In a small community of British Columbia, Canada Post was in the process of reviewing the local mail delivery network and informed a group of rural customers who had been receiving mail via Group Mailboxes (GMBs) for an extended period of time that it intended not only to replace the GMBs with modern Community Mailboxes (CMBs) but also to relocate the delivery site to a more suitable location. Canada Post said the new site had been selected because it was more conveniently located on a road that residents took on their way to town and that mail could be safely delivered and picked up.

Customers strongly objected to the move, arguing that most of them did not have to venture into town everyday and that if the site were to be relocated, they would be greatly inconvenienced by having to travel further to pick up their mail. As such, they insisted that Canada Post erect the new CMBs on the original site, however, municipal transport authorities objected to this, as the original location did not provide sufficient space for a new CMB site.

The Office of the Ombudsman discussed the issue with both parties and enquired with Canada Post whether they would be willing to install the new CMB site in the original location, should the residents agree to provide the extension of property required. All parties agreed to the compromise offered by the Office of the Ombudsman.

Canada Post set up an upgraded delivery site at the original location and customers continued to safely pick-up their mail without having to drive an extended distance.

Case 2

This case illustrates the synergy between Canada Post and the Office of the Ombudsman, as a simple telephone conversation between the two, rectified a problematic situation that had been ongoing for several months.

A customer had complained to Canada Post that the gas station/convenience store, where he was required to pick-up his mail, did not offer sufficient parking area. The customer claimed that the situation was often aggravated when large delivery trucks partially blocked access to the site and insisted that picking-up his mail had become a safety hazard.

Some Issues

Case 2 – Con't

The Office of the Ombudsman examined the local delivery network for the community and quickly realized that the delivery site in question was not the most convenient for that particular customer. In fact, the review showed that this customer should be receiving his mail at another delivery site located closer to his residence. Canada Post recognized the oversight and agreed to start delivering that customer's mail at the closer location.

Case 3

This case illustrates how the Ombudsman can influence practices and/or policies at Canada Post by making recommendations to improve the postal service.

When a parcel cannot be delivered and bears no return address, Canada Post regulations stipulate that it be sent to the Undeliverable Mail Office (UMO) where its contents are listed in a database in the event that someone were to claim it at a later date. When dollar bills or coins are found in such parcels, the monies are immediately deposited into a bank account and if the UMO is able to identify either the sender or the addressee, Canada Post issues a money order equivalent to the monies found.

An undeliverable parcel containing a photo-album in which uncirculated dollar bills had been included was forwarded to the UMO where the monies found were converted into a money order for subsequent remittance to the legitimate claimant, the sender.

The customer appealed to the Ombudsman stating that the dollar bills she had included in the photo-album were unique and were meant as keepsakes for her grandchildren. She further explained that this was the reason why she had taken the time to set them up in an artistic manner in the album and refused to accept the money order on that basis. The Office of the Ombudsman offered a mediated resolution where Canada Post agreed to provide compensation for the market value of these uncirculated bills.

Subsequently, the Ombudsman recommended that Canada Post amend its regulations to prevent similar incidents from reoccurring. Canada Post accepted the Ombudsman's recommendation and as of recently, any money, bills or coins, found in a presentation format inside a parcel forwarded to the UMO will be kept and remitted as is to the legitimate claimant.

Case 4

This case outlines how, under certain circumstances, the Ombudsman has no choice but to concur with Canada Post regulations that are obvious and clear, even when his final decision may not be perceived to be fair.

Some Issues

Case 4 – Con't

A customer purchased and mailed a Purolator International envelope at a Canada Post outlet in which he included money in the form of cash. Though the envelope in question reached its destination, it had been unlawfully tampered with and the monetary contents removed.

In reviewing this case, it was found that the customer had not read the disclaimer on the reverse side of the Purolator receipt, which clearly states that cash is a prohibited item. Despite the customer's financial loss, the Ombudsman supported Canada Post's original decision not to reimburse him for his loss.

Case 5

This case is profiled because it occurs on a regular basis, year after year. Customers mail fragile items and find that although the parcels are successfully delivered, some are damaged in transit. Canada Post's regulations are clear on that issue. Items that are made of glass and/or ceramic are considered fragile and can only be insured for loss and not for damage.

In an effort to better inform its customers, Canada Post displays handouts entitled "Just a reminder..." at postal outlets across the country to notify them of certain features and/or restrictions on products and services provided at the counter. The restriction regarding fragile parcels is listed on that leaflet. Additionally, Canada Post "Fragile" stickers clearly indicate, "Glass and Ceramics are not subject to coverage for damage".

A customer from rural Alberta sent a glass figurine to a relative for her birthday, for which he purchased insurance at the time of mailing. Although well wrapped in protective bubble wrap, the figurine was damaged in transit. The sender subsequently sought compensation from Canada Post who in turn declined the customer's request on the basis that the contents of a parcel that are deemed fragile in nature can only be insured for loss and not for damage. In this case, the Ombudsman supported Canada Post's original decision.

Improving Postal Service

The Ombudsman will from time to time bring his concerns regarding certain aspects of the postal service to the attention of senior management at Canada Post. Although not binding on Canada Post, his recommendations are always welcome and well considered by Canada Post executives.

In the course of the last year, several customers appealed to the Ombudsman explaining that Canada Post refused to compensate them despite the fact that they purchased insurance at the time of mailing and that their parcels had not been delivered to the addressees. However, in most instances, our review of these cases revealed that Canada Post's tracking system confirmed that parcels were successfully delivered. As such, customers had no recourse.

10 The Ombudsman reviewed the situation and recommended that a built-in signature feature be included whenever customers purchase insurance at the time of mailing. This signature would provide the identity of the person receiving the mail item and consequently avoid similar misunderstandings from reoccurring. Canada Post accepted the Ombudsman's recommendation and confirmed its intention to review the proposed feature in an upcoming product review exercise.

Staff Development

All staff assigned to complaints resolution in the Office of the Ombudsman must be able to respond to customers quickly, fairly and in a comprehensive manner. The proficiency of all workers in this specialized field of expertise must be hastily attained and constantly renewed.


It is imperative that all staff is familiar with the various components and operations of Canada Post and more importantly that they be able to easily reach the Canada Post personnel who are most likely to respond to enquiries during their investigations.

Accordingly, all new staff joining the Office of the Ombudsman undergoes an extensive training and orientation program. The training and development period extends over a period of time and includes briefings from Canada Post executives in various operational areas, accompanying a letter carrier on a daily walk, spending a day in a postal outlet to observe counter transactions and visiting a mail processing plant to better understand mail operations.

In addition, all staff is required to attend a four-day seminar to learn about the Retail Operating Support System. This allows them to become familiar with state-of-the-art technology systems used by Canada Post to manage all counter transactions in postal outlets.

All staff involved in the complaint resolution process must also attend workshops and seminars in dispute resolution, negotiation and mediation, provided by private sector firms and universities.

A well-trained and knowledgeable workforce ensures consistency in the provision of high quality and professional services.

Did you
Know? 

That the Ombudsman is independent from Canada Post and reports to the Chairperson of the Board of Directors.

That the services provided by the Office of the Ombudsman are available to all Canadians free of charge.

That fragile items, made of glass and/or ceramic, as well as perishable items are insured for loss only and not for damage.

- 12 That while the Ombudsman cannot force Canada Post to take specific corrective action; he uses his power of persuasion to encourage Canada Post to implement his recommendations.

That the Ombudsman will not investigate a complaint until he is satisfied that all available means to resolve the problem have been exhausted at Canada Post.

That if your complaint does not involve a postal matter over which the Ombudsman has jurisdiction, he will refer you to the appropriate organization.

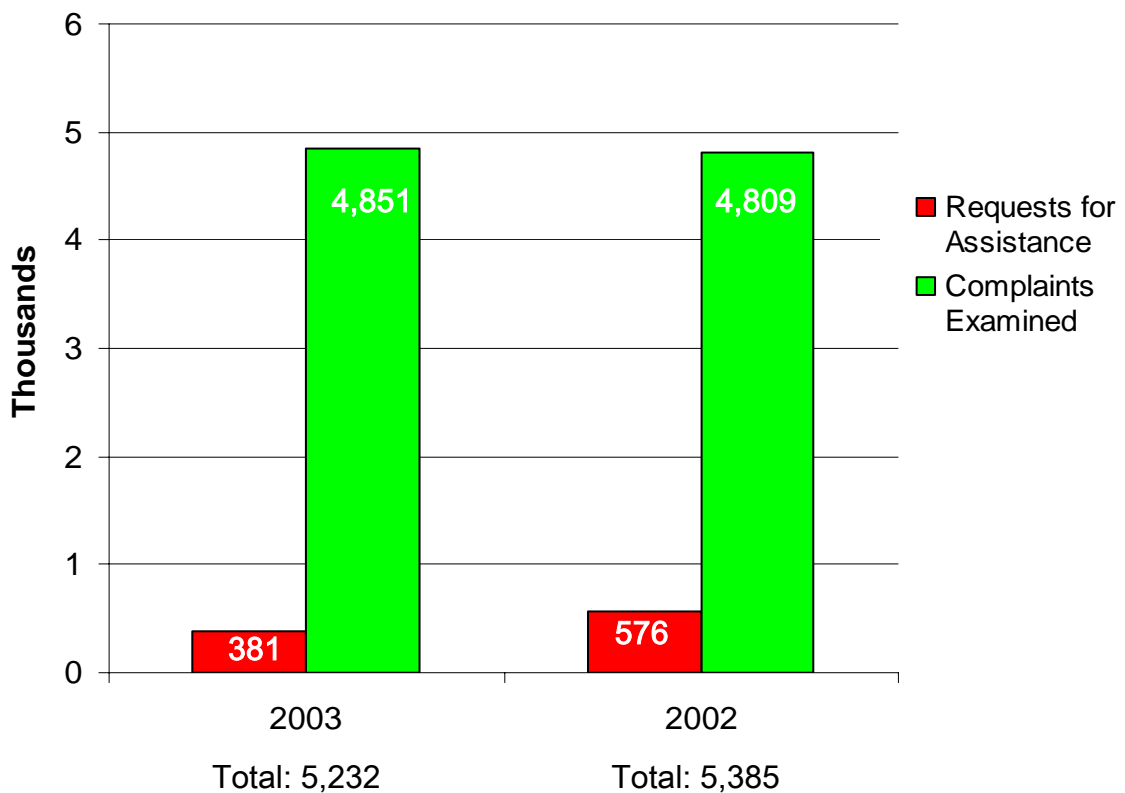
Statistics

1. Requests for Assistance

In 2003, the Office of the Ombudsman received a total of 5,232 requests for assistance, a decrease of 2.8% over last year. Our statistics reveal the while the majority of these requests were submitted by individual consumers, 345 requests for assistance were submitted by businesses and associations.

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Requests for Assistance



Statistics

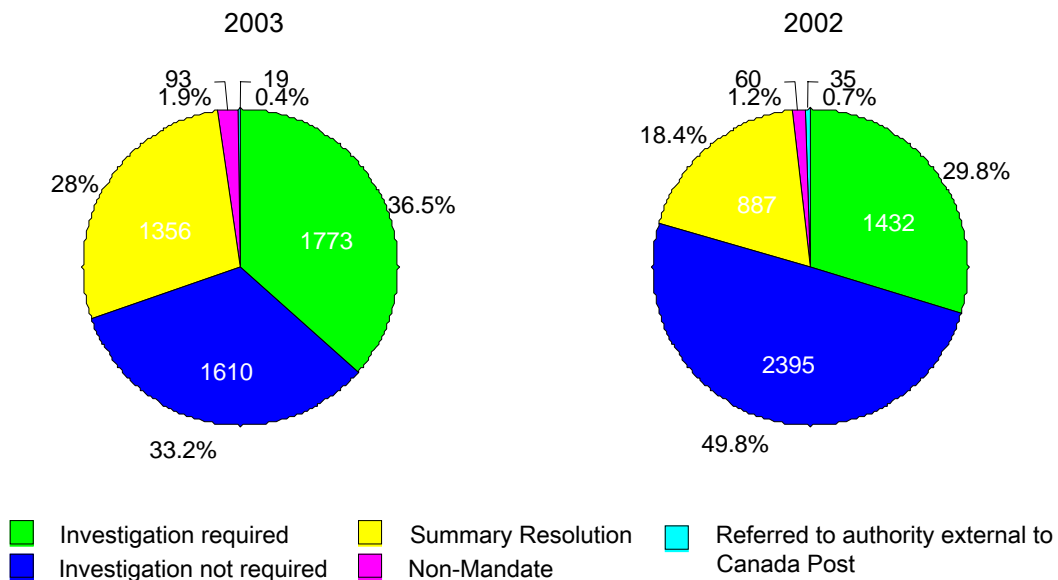
2. Complaints Examined

While 36.6% of the cases processed in 2003 required in-depth investigations, the remaining 63.4% of complaints were resolved when customers initially contacted the Office of the Ombudsman. Of particular interest is the fact that the number of investigated cases has increased by 23.8% compared to the previous year.

Historically, the Office of the Ombudsman notices an upsurge in the number of complaints during the winter months and in the spring. This peak is generally followed by a quieter period during the summer months, however, our statistics demonstrated that this pattern did not repeat itself in 2003. As a result, 125 active cases were carried over at the end of the reporting period compared to 67 cases the previous year.

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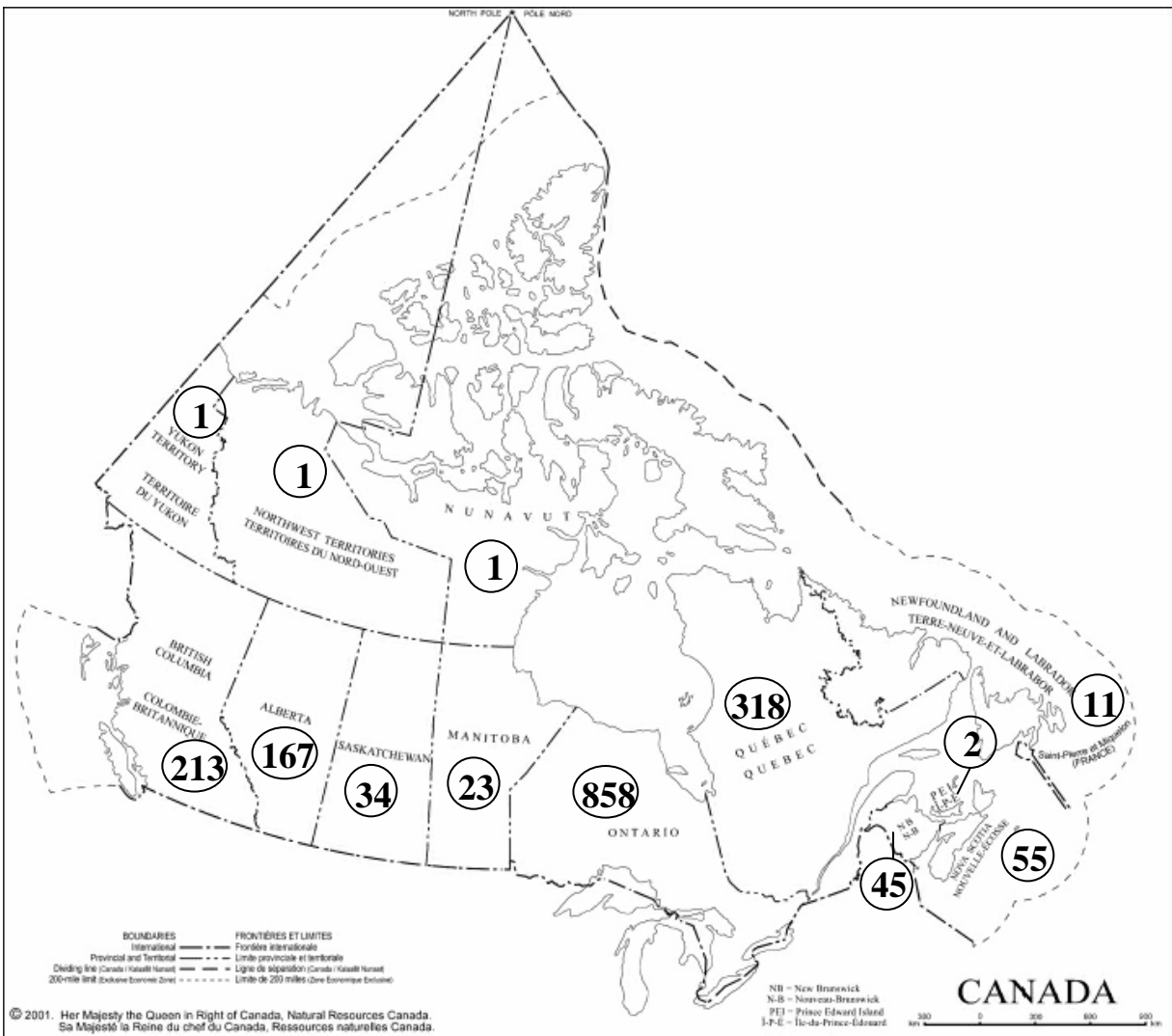
Complaints Examined



3. Origin of Complaints

Over the course of the last year, the Office of the Ombudsman investigated a total of 1,773 cases. This statistic includes 44 investigated cases submitted by customers residing in foreign countries.

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How to Contact the
Office of the Ombudsman

PO Box 90026
Ottawa ON K1V 1J8

Telephone: 1 800 204-4198

Fax: 1 800 204-4193