



Handwritten Notes Are a Rare Commodity. They're Also More Important Than Ever.

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When I was a college student interning in Washington, D.C., a senior manager, Bridgett, made a habit of treating each intern to lunch over the summer. When my turn rolled around, it was no surprise that Bridgett proved an adept conversationalist and an excellent host.

Several weeks after I'd returned to college, however, I was surprised to find an envelope from Bridgett in my mailbox. It contained a handwritten note and a copy of Flannery O'Connor's *Mystery and Manners*, a book she'd recommended over lunch. I barely knew Bridgett, but her note said that I'd helped her organization and that she appreciated it and wished me luck. It was a gesture that stayed with me and forever led me to view Bridgett as a thoughtful person.

Personal handwritten notes grow rarer by the day. According to the [U.S. Postal Service's annual survey](#), the average home only received a personal letter once every seven weeks in 2010, down from once every two weeks in 1987. And *The Wall Street Journal* recently lamented the ["lost art of the handwritten note."](#) Some might claim that in a wired world — where emails, tweets, and text messages are more accessible than handwritten notes — this is the natural evolution of communication. Who has time for stamps, stationery, and "manual" spell-check, after all? But I think it's premature to write off the importance of handwritten notes. They remain impactful and unique in several ways.

For one, handwritten notes mean more because they cost more. Emails, tweets, texts, or Facebook messages are essentially costless. They're easy to write and free to send, and you and I produce hundreds of them every day. A recent study indicated the average corporate email account sent or [received more than 100 emails per day \(PDF\)](#), and Americans between the ages of 18 and 29 now [send or receive nearly 100 texts per day](#).

These electronic communications are rarely notable. But handwritten notes are unusual. They take minutes (or hours) to draft, each word carefully chosen with no "undo" or "autocorrect" to fall back on. Drafting one involves selecting stationery, paying for stamps, and visiting a mailbox. They indicate investment, and that very costliness indicates value. If, as the U.S. Postal Service notes, we only receive a handwritten letter once every two months, each of those letters likely means more to us than the "cheaper" communication we receive each day.

That conveyance of value is amplified by the fact that personal messages are often notes of gratitude, civility, and appreciation that reach beyond the conventional thank-you. Robert Cialdini, in his classic

work *Influence: The Psychology of Persuasion*, profiled legendary car salesman Joe Girard. Perhaps the most successful salesman of his generation, Joe would send a handwritten message to all his clients once a month with simple messages printed inside like, "I like you." Joe believed these little notes were one of the reasons his clients stayed so loyal to him. Because handwritten notes are so painstakingly slow — to draft, to send, to assure delivery — they're often a poor way to ask for things. Instead, they're more frequently used to remind others that you value your relationship.

While saying "thank you" is important, the beauty of a well-crafted handwritten note is that it can show deeper investment and appreciation than a simple thank-you can. It can follow up on a conversation, remind someone they're not forgotten, raise new issues, or even include a gift, like Bridgett's, that carries its own meaning. And in a world where so much communication is merely utilitarian, these simple acts of investment, remembrance, gratitude, and appreciation can show the people who matter to your life and business that they are important to you.

As an added bonus, studies show that those who express gratitude also benefit by experiencing better health and sleep, less anxiety, and more life satisfaction. They benefit giver and receiver alike.

Finally, handwritten notes have permanence. How many of us have our old high school yearbooks in a closet somewhere? How many keep shoe boxes with old letters or short notes from former colleagues or friends? The last time I moved, I came across several boxes of correspondence I'd had over the years. Taking the time to read through some of them, I found the memories of my old friends and colleagues, and my gratitude for them was reinvigorated. Email is "permanent" in its own way; our electronic messages are easy to keep and search in huge volumes. But they aren't tangible and enduring in the same way those old notes are. We don't print emails and display them on our desks, refrigerators, and mantles the way we do with letters and notes from friends. The physical notes are more memorable.

It may seem nostalgic, but I still believe there's room for the handwritten note in personal and professional communication. They cost something, mean something, and have permanence in a way emails and text messages don't. They let the people in our lives know we appreciate them enough to do something as archaic as pausing for 15 minutes to put pen to paper in an attempt to connect and sustain a relationship with them. I still remember that note from Bridgett — and many others I've received over the years — and perhaps in writing personal notes to our friends and colleagues, we can reach out to others in a way that creates a lasting, positive connection.

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JOHN COLEMAN

John Coleman is a coauthor of the book, *Passion & Purpose: Stories from the Best and Brightest Young Business Leaders*. Follow him on Twitter at [@johnwcoleman](#).