

What is QSL'ing and how to QSL?

Your editor's contribution to Intech.net 2 Sept 2007

Some notes on physical card exchange

QSL'ing, is sending and receiving proof of contact by way of "QSL" cards via the mail service. It is a type of postcard that conveys the technical detail of a contact by way of amateur radio in any mode. Any other embellishments can be added according to personal taste.

You may ask: What is the purpose of QSL'ing?

There are several reasons why amateurs send and receive QSL cards. One is that confirmation that the contact actually took place. Many awards are only issued with presentation of QSL cards as indisputable proof, although some awards are issued using the "honour system".

How do amateurs know each others address?

All amateurs are issued a call sign by their local communications authority appointed licensing body. When one receives a license, that persons name and address becomes public record, so, there are institutions that publish books and CD's that list names and addresses by call sign. There are also many search engines on the WWW that will give you that information.

Is it expensive to QSL?

It can get expensive, especially if you make lots of contacts and everyone wants your card! Luckily, not everyone sends out cards, and not everyone wants your card. The cheapest way is to belong to a QSL service called a "QSL Bureau". This service accepts your outgoing cards and ships them off to their destination for a modest fee. Many countries have such a service but some may only have an outgoing DX service such as the ARRL in the USA. In South Africa we are lucky to have this service both ways - in and out. Bureau cards take much longer than direct mail, due to the handling and also the time involved in accumulating the right amount of cards to make the service worthwhile. Secondly there is another bureau on the other side in a similar situation.

How do the different "Bureaus" work ?

For most, you will need to be a member of that organization. To receive incoming cards, bureaus - including our SARL Bureau - require SASE's to be on file so that when 10 or so cards accumulate to you, you will receive them by normal mail.

Bureau staff have a thankless job handling thousands of cards over a year but they do it free of charge out of love for the hobby.

Remember that when you move to another address, let them know by way of new SASE's.

Now for some tips !

Not every card you send out will produce a return. That is just the way it is. Some amateurs just do not QSL for one reason or another. Cards occasionally get lost in the mail, or mail gets lost in various kinds of crime and disaster. In order to get a good rate of return, you need to do the following:

Choose or make a well designed card. Make sure all the information on the card is precisely correct.

ALWAYS use GMT, Greenwich Mean Time - also referred to as Coordinated Universal Time referred to as UTC, for both time and date.

Let me explain that in more detail:

Firstly, the card size should preferably be 140x85mm - not the old 6x4 inch postcard size. Everyone likes to receive a professional distinct card with some other unique picture or background of your person, shack, historical site, etc. Don't skimp in this department. Your card, like your call sign, is your trademark.

The minimum QSO information it must contain to make it a valid QSL, is as follows:

1. Your own callsign and name with preferably your physical or email address.
2. The callsign of the station contacted and the operators' name and city.
If that station has a manager for incoming cards, state "via" the callsign of that manager.
Whether there is a manager or not, the destination callsign must be written on the rear of the card so that sorting by bureau staff can be made easier.
3. The date of contact.
4. The GMT time of when the contact was started.
5. The band on which the contact took place.
6. The signal report you gave that station.
7. The mode of contact ie: CW or SSB or PSK31 etc.
8. An indication of a return QSL required or that a QSL was already received.
9. Last but not least it is of interest to include somewhere your CQ and ITU zone number as well as your grid location. We are in CQ zone 38 and ITU zone 57.

This will ensure that the receiver of that card can present it for any award.

Today logging programs can print most of this information on a sticky label for which you can design a special space on your card.

Some notes on sending direct.

If you want a station's card in a hurry, you can bypass the bureau by sending direct. Send your card together with a self-addressed envelope plus reimbursement in the form of an International Reply Coupon that can be exchanged for return postage.

Address the envelope as if it was normal correspondence as callsigns attract thieves to remove IRC's or dollar notes that are sometimes used as preferred payment. Even then there can be a delay.

Your contact may be on holiday, in hospital or even gone silent key.

A special case is a DX-expedition that may have ended and may have electronic logs, but the cards may not yet have been designed or printed. Thousands of QSL labels have also to be printed.

Even if they are available, the sheer amount of work involved may have you under the big pile for several weeks.

In closing I can say from many years of experience that it is very satisfying to receive tangible proof of one's DX efforts.

Apart from having trophy value of some kind, most cards received invariably convey something personal of the operator, his country and operating conditions.

Common courtesy demands that you do the same in return.