

Global Addressing Briefing for the U.S. Business Mailer

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 street 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. Printing a foreign address correctly on an envelope or label can be as much of a challenge as capturing and storing the address data. A few basic facts are helpful in understanding global addressing from a U.S. perspective:

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.

Tip: 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 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, a number of countries that use them in *most* postal addresses do not use them for addresses in the capital or for major cities.

Tip: 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.

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.

Tip: 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.

Using the information above to expand your company's database is a good start. Knowledgeable vendors and consultants, such as [GrayHair Software](#) and [GrayHair Advisors](#), can provide detailed information on the requirements while saving time and money for your company.

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