



By Christopher Lien

Real Treasure

Software as a future of the mail center

As Tax Day approaches, millions of private citizens struggle through the process of manually completing their returns. Others will use electronic means or hire a preparer to do the work for them. But suppose for a moment that you are the Chief Financial Officer for a Fortune 500 corporation. Can you imagine, even for a second, the insanity of trying to complete your company's tax return on your dining room table?

It's similarly mind-boggling to visualize the execution of an effective mailing job — properly adherent to USPS requirements and receiving all the postage discounts for which it should be eligible and prepared on time and on budget — without mailing software. The rules have become too complex, and the margins of error too slim, for a mail processing operation to attempt such detail-oriented work without a USPS-certified program to do the heavy lifting behind the scenes.

For all that, however, software is still taken for granted by too many mailers. While not necessarily as extreme as the "set it and forget it" philosophy of late-night infomercials, there is a casual indifference exhibited toward postal software by some users that can directly inhibit the ability of those users to grow and prosper.

In fact, software is in many ways the future of our industry; a fundamental component, but also a critical one, as it is the exclusive home to the catalysts for opportunity and growth. Simply put, software is rapidly becoming essential to doing business with the Postal Service, and your involvement with your software (and your software provider) should not be taken lightly.

Three factors drive this point home:

The Importance of Working Smarter

That four-word phrase, “Work Smarter, Not Harder,” has become a popular mantra in the business world, especially in recent years as across-the-board belt-tightening has forced corporate America to form a new devotion to efficiencies in all forms. And its logic is unassailable, for while there will always be limits to our time and resources, our ability to become more intelligent about the way we work is, for all intents and purposes, infinite in scope.

So if we can accept this as an axiom for our industry, the next question is obvious: In a high-pressure, highly competitive mailing business, what does it mean to “work smarter?” How much more productivity can you expect to yield by retraining your staff? Simple necessity dictates that their experience, combined with diligent management, should already be achieving something very close to peak results in that area.

What about redesigning your physical plant to sharpen throughput? In theory, it might be an intriguing notion, but in the real world, you probably can’t conceive of shutting down your operations long enough to effect that change — and even if you could, the likely returns on that massive investment would be minimal.

The obvious origin of any improved “intelligence” in your operations lies within the software, perhaps better thought of as the “brains” of any modern mailing system. CASS- and PAVE-certified software ceased being merely optional for competitive mailers years ago, and yet it’s still human nature to allow the significance of this workflow component to recede into the background: Too many mailers receive their data updates, install the CDs and promptly go back to their default concerns of hardware maintenance, throughput speeds and client relations. They can’t see the software working, so it’s easy to take its “invisible” contributions for granted. They do so at their peril.

Taking Cues from the USPS

As this article goes to press, the USPS is scheduled to introduce a streamlined acceptance policy for hard-copy postage statements. (For details, see the December 2, 2009 *DMM Advisory* at <http://pe.usps.com/dmmAdvisory.asp>.)

Starting March 15, customers who submit their mailings with a hard-copy postage statement to acceptance sites equipped with *PostalOne!* will no longer receive a hard-copy receipt, unless requested. Instead, the USPS is encouraging mailers to visit the USPS Business Customer Gateway — the new system of record for the Postal Service — to access *PostalOne!* and receive electronic confirmation of their accepted mailing job.

“The new process is part of the Postal Service’s efforts to speed and improve customer service by streamlining business mail acceptance,” the *DMM Advisory* tells us. Essentially, they are indicating what most of us have known for years: that physical paperwork can bog down an effective operation, and that software-driven technology is the key to our moving forward as competitive, efficient, 21st century mailers.

Of course, the best and most persuasive indicator of the unprecedented role now played by software in mailing is not in software itself but in that new barcode being applied to more and more mailpieces every day.

The old POSTNET barcode, as revolutionary as it was for its time, was effectively obsolete as soon as it was launched: Human-readable and capable of fulfilling the objective for which it was designed and nothing more, its limitations were obvious. With the new Intelligent Mail system, the United States Postal Service has invested in barcode technology that possesses all the pre-mailing advantages of POSTNET coupled with vast post-mailing potential.

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These advantages — advanced address-correction and mailpiece tracking resources, plus the ability to generate pinpoint data characteristics about individual mailpieces and their recipients — are transforming mail from a medium with solely physical qualities to one with newfound “virtual” possibilities as well. It’s no longer just about the mailpiece, or even about the address. With Intelligent Mail, it’s about the data at the core of your mailings, and the right software solution can make all the difference in managing that data for the betterment of your business.

Postal Economics 101

All this represents good news for mailers (for a change!), in that software is so inexpensive compared to other components of a modern postal workflow. Renewal costs are a recurring factor, but it’s not hard to see why; the regular updates supplied by your provider are akin to the “schooling” that keeps the brain of your operations up-to-speed with the ever-changing USPS status quo.

With the rising importance of software-based innovations among mailing operations, the idea of exploring your options for improvement with your current provider, or even looking at other software solutions altogether, is made much easier by the reality of such decisions amounting to a small investment. And when you factor in the ROI potential of leveraging the complete capabilities of Full Service Intelligent Mail, or of taking advantage of commingling and other mail-sorting techniques, the truly remarkable value of software becomes fully apparent.

As with any technology model, mailing software has evolved over time. What began as a simple stage in the mail-preparation process (with crucial but limited address correction and standardization) has now moved on to advanced content management that allows forward-thinking postal professionals to achieve previously unimaginable results. Along the way, something fascinating happened: The invisible became invaluable. ■

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