

the essentials for a



first-class mail center

BY MICHAEL MAGUIRE

The mail center is a dynamic point of communication for your organization. Keep it running at peak efficiency with the latest furnishings and technology.

As you look to improve your mailing effectiveness, reviewing why the mail center is critical to the operation of your organization is essential. However, if you're reading this, you recognize the need to outfit an integral communication point in your organization with the best technology available. The first challenge is to understand what your mail center means to you and your organization.

Your organization has three pipelines for information:

- your computer network, including the Internet and e-mail
- your telephone system and voice mail
- your mail center.

What attention do you give the technology and operation of the first two compared

to the mail center? Think about what would happen if your computer network or telephone service went down. Does the term "sheer pandemonium" cover it? Your mail center bears equal weight when it comes to information exchange. As well as being an information hub, your mail center may play an integral part in mailing out your company's products. No mail center might mean a stop in shipments to customers.

First-class solution: Understand the importance of the mail center in your operation.

LOCATION, LOCATION, LOCATION

Every mailing system vendor has a compendium of information on how his system makes the most sense, is easiest to

use, and is the most efficient. You might be surprised to learn, all of them are valid, given a certain application. What vendors can't address (by no fault of their own) is how you operate your particular mail center. If your mail center is a scary place to go and if it's in an unpleasant part of the building, no machine will ever reach the production values quoted to you by the vendor.

To make the mail center productive, it has to be in a location people like to go. It doesn't have to be an amusement park, but it also shouldn't be a cement bunker in the basement. It has to be well-lit (the more natural light the better) and have plants, pictures, windows, and everything that makes it an easy place to do business. Your mail center is important to your organization, and the department should be treated as such.

First-class solution: Make sure you have a nice room with windows, plants, and pictures before you begin your mail center overhaul.

MODULARITY RULES

Some organizations feel that card tables and cardboard boxes are adequate furniture for a mail center. Do tin cans and string cover the needs of the phone center? Let's invoke the theory of 2M: modular and movable.

A mail center requires certain functions to be performed at the same place every day so a semblance of order and production can be maintained. To the average corporate customer, the actual fixture is inconsequential. What *is* important is going to the same place for the same thing. That doesn't mean that there can't be some modifications for seasonal influxes and volume changes. This is precisely why mail fixtures must be modular and movable. The appliance doesn't have to be the same. Only the "area of function" has to be consistent.

For example, the mail drop-off area should be constant. Fixtures should be movable and adaptable, but not areas.

First-class solution: Purchase movable and modular fixtures.

WATCH YOUR WASTE: WHO PAID FOR WHAT AND WHY

"Fed Ex it" is a very common directive to mailing and shipping centers today. Did you know that if you're in San Diego and you want to ship to Los Angeles, you can usually get the same service for pennies or one or two dollars, rather than tens of dollars, using traditional First Class mail via the U.S. Postal Service (USPS)? This isn't to diminish the value of overnight services. Those services do an impeccable job, and you should continue to use them if that's what you need.

Perhaps just asking yourself whether

overnight is overkill will reduce some of these excess overnight costs. Using a postal accounting system will not only watch your expenditures by person or department, it might suggest ways that you can ship smarter. It might show that 82.75 percent of the overnight packages you sent could have been delivered by Priority Mail in two days or less for half the price. Is the performance standard of two days acceptable?

Obviously, there has to be some degree of accountability when using overnight services, and using a postal accounting system will help. The practice of sending virtually all one-off documents via an overnight service (often referred to as "wild overnighting") can consume a postal budget quickly, when solid and stable First Class mail could deliver the same documents in two or three days for pennies.

First-class solution A: Purchase a postal accounting system and use it.

First-class solution B: Set performance standards. Two days for half the price might be just as good.

ADDRESS CORRECTION

Address standardization and correction may be the most important postal initiative today. When was the last time you dialed the wrong number and reached the right person? The same holds true for postal addresses.

With the help of low-cost software, you can correct your addresses with the right designators (St., Blvd., Hwy., and so forth), the right directionals (north, south, east, or west), the correct ZIP codes, and the appropriate ZIP+4 codes. To look up and correct a single address, visit the USPS' Website, www.usps.gov; but for batch processing of your client records, you'll need special software.

Next, check if anyone on your mailing list has moved. You might be sending informa-

tion on your guitar customizing service to a person who doesn't play the guitar because your guitar-playing customer has moved. Your software provider and a USPS program called Move Updating can help you check for customers who have moved. A very popular system called NCOALink updates the addresses of customers who have moved in the last 18 months and identifies any customers who have moved in the last 24 months. NCOALink is simple to use, inexpensive, and available from all popular mail management software vendors.

First-class solution: A correct address is a deliverable address. Update addresses prior to your next mailing.

I HAVE NO TIME TO FOLD AND STUFF

Perhaps the most dreaded task in the office is folding and stuffing statements, letters, and newsletters into envelopes. Fortunately, there's technology that will not only do this for you, it will do it faster and more accurately than you ever dreamed possible. Moreover, this equipment that was once only available to professional mail shops is now designed and priced for office use.

Automatic folder/inserters offer a wide variety of capabilities and speeds. A good rule of thumb: Look for a machine that will accommodate 75-80 percent of your jobs at a speed that's about five times faster than you're doing it now. Most units will "remember" common jobs by the use of a preset button, and you can load the units with paper and envelopes much like you would load media in an ordinary photocopier.

Mail openers can also enhance productivity. With these devices, you drop in your entire stack of inbound mail, and everything is opened in seconds with no harm to the contents. On many machines, the opening is milled open rather than cut, so the chance of paper cuts is reduced. It's a better, faster, and

safer way of opening mail.

First-class solution: Your staff probably has a lot more to offer your organization than folding, stuffing, and opening envelopes. Invest in a machine that performs these tedious tasks.


BUYING A FIRST-CLASS MAILING SYSTEM

More than 90 percent of all mail equipment and systems are leased. That doesn't necessarily make it the right financial decision for you however. The beauty of leasing is that you can upgrade equipment without penalty for doing so. Leasing also helps you spread your capital around rather than allocating it for a single purchase. Discuss the financial advantages with your accountant since each circumstance is different.

First-class solution: When it comes to obtaining the equipment, consider all your options—to buy out right, to lease, or a combination of both.

CONCLUSION

Sending mail via the USPS is the most official and popular way to communicate on paper. More people have mailboxes than have computers. In addition, once a bill, statement, or other legal document enters the mail stream, many important controls and legal ramifications are initiated. These protect both the sender and the receiver. With technological improvements by the USPS, delivery speed has increased.

Postal mail is a necessary ingredient in your organization's communication with customers, prospects, and vendors. Reducing processing costs and delivery time makes that communication more effective and serves everyone better. 

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