

Where's My Mail?

BY SHAWN R. SALTA



direct mail is measurable—and clients demand quantitative results—there is not a person among us who hasn't received the dreaded client call with the impossible question, "Where's my mail?"

Much has changed over the last 10 years. So let's recap the older, more primitive approaches and then talk about new technology that gives savvy mailers a competitive advantage.

Early Approaches to Locate Mail

Provide the postal paperwork! While this step always comes first, it really doesn't provide concrete answers. Providing the paperwork does little to calm clients' frustration.

Call the post office! Calling the post office really isn't a viable option, but clients still push mailers in this direction. No one at the U.S. Postal Service knows the location of mail once it is injected into the system. To save face with one client, I once flew to a Sectional Center Facility (SCF) to speak with the manager about our recurring problems. While I didn't expect to find the misplaced mail, the meeting put a face on "our" mail and later yielded better service and fewer holdups. Sadly, mailers have neither the resources nor the desire to travel to the 400-plus SCFs and 28 Network Distribution Centers nationwide.

The most critical component of the direct mail industry is the portion over which we exercise the least control: mail delivery. While

marketers don't like the look of a second barcode, so they use it sparingly and track only a percentage of the overall mailing.

Newer Forms of Tracking

Prepare your mail. The secret to quick, efficient mail delivery is presorting to the lowest level possible. Even if vendors charge an additional fee to presort, the resultant delivery speed outweighs the cost. Good data processing shops will evaluate trucking costs, too. If savings accrue by drop shipping to the SCF/NDC, go with it, as it is preferable to avoid origin entry. For pieces that do not qualify for entry discounts, move the mail via commingling or copalletization to maximize the number of pieces dropping at the SCF/NDC level. I prefer copalletization because a processor moves the trays from one skid to the next without touching the pieces. The USPS also provides a round-stamped 3607 through the copal process. In commingling, pieces must be sorted, making the process longer. Plus, a run report results, not a USPS-certified document.

Copalletization offers mail transparency and delivery speed. Individual trays are tracked, and clients can follow their progress from processing to destination plant. The Postal Service's

FAST system reports the exact date and time of tray/skid receipt. From this baseline, higher-level tracking can take place.

Use the Intelligent Mail barcode (IMB). Even though tracking is not part of the basic IMB, it still represents a major technological advance. If desired, tracking barcodes can be created using third-party platforms, such as GrayHair Software, which offer single-barcode "tracking IMBs." The

advantages include:

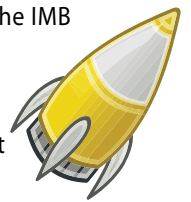
- A cleaner delivery address block.
- The ability to track an entire mailing, which allows individual mail piece lookup, or a statistically valid sample, which can target all entry points and minimize cost.

Knowing the date and time skids arrive at SCFs/NDCs (from FAST) and the IMB scan date allows calculation of USPS sorting time. Generally speaking, mail will hit individual mailboxes the next delivery day after SCF scanning. Although validation of final mail is impossible, delivery local seeds can help.

Utilize local mail seeds. Choose mail seeds in the same 3-digit, or even better, 5-digit Zip codes as the bulk of the mailing; otherwise, the receipt date of the seeds will not accurately reflect overall mail delivery. This approach is essential when clients are targeting small areas, perhaps around a retail location. If you do not know individuals to serve as seeds, a third-party service, such as US Mail Monitor, can provide them.

Tie it all together. This approach is three-pronged. Omitting any step will create tracking gaps and leave the question, "Where's my mail?" unanswered.

Shawn R. Salta is vice president of DirectMail.com and a certified direct marketer. He oversees multiple aspects of DirectMail.com's business operations, but specializes in new technology identification with the goal of offering clients advanced multi-channel marketing tools, streamlining direct mail operations and increasing overall enterprise efficiency. Shawn serves as Industry Chairman, Washington Metropolitan Postal Consumer Council, and was instrumental in developing Enhanced Postal Optimization, a program that generates cost savings and faster delivery options for DirectMail.com's clients throughout the country. To contact Shawn, please e-mail SSalta@directmail.com or call 443-295-1088.



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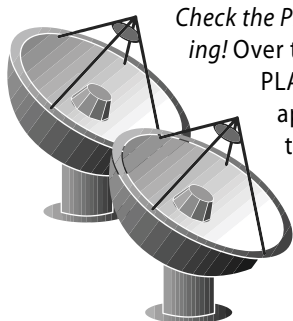
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Check the PLANET Code tracking! Over the last decade, PLANET Codes, which appear as an additional barcode in the delivery address, have helped pinpoint mail location. Most

