

Neither Snow nor Rain nor... Email?

An observation by Alan Sadowsky

It's November again. It's getting cooler, Thanksgiving is just around the corner, and it won't be long before the Christmas lights start going up on the houses in the neighborhood. It's also time to start preparing the Christmas card lists, for the annual "Can I Get Them In The Mail Early Enough So They're Actually Delivered On Time This Year" contest.

I happened to be in the post office recently, and even though we're still a few weeks away from Christmas, I couldn't help noticing that I was the only customer there. As the settlers used to remark in almost every western movie, "It sure is quiet. Too quiet." Here it was only a few weeks before Christmas, and there were no long lines at the post office. What on earth was happening here? In a word - email.

Apparently the explosion of Internet technology is beginning to take a toll on the U.S. Postal Service (USPS). Postmaster General William J. Henderson announced that the Postal Service expects to lose as much as \$300 million this fiscal year, in good part due to "the diversion of letter mail to email". Also contributing to the crisis is the stiff competition coming from FedEx and UPS in both the overnight and priority letter/package venues. In fact things are looking so bleak, that the Postal Service is actually in negotiations with FedEx to form a strategic alliance. Under the alliance, the Postal Service would deliver many FedEx packages to homes across the U.S. while using FedEx's air transport network to move Priority and Express Mail around the world. Not a bad deal for either concern, but it still doesn't solve the "snail-mail" dilemma.

There's a lot to be said for progress. The written word has certainly come a long way in the past few thousand years. From cave paintings, to clay tablets, to chiseled stone, to papyrus, to pen and ink, to printing press, to typewriter, and finally to word processor. In the same vein, the exchange process for personal and business correspondence has also evolved, although in this case the window of change is only a few hundred years.

Beginning with runners and couriers, the process moved to Pony Express horseback riders, to rail-based mail cars, to steamship, to airmail carriers, to facsimile (fax) machines,

and most recently to email. The days of sitting down to write a letter are all but over for today's plugged-in society. So are the days of folding the letter, sealing the envelope, licking the stamp, and heading off to the mailbox. These days, you select your recipients, type your correspondence, drag & drop your attachments, and hit the send button. Without question, email is one of the true technological marvels of the late 20th century. Not only are you able to send a letter to someone, but you can also send any number of attachments with it, in the form of other documents, photographs, voice or music files, and even animation or full-motion video clips. What could be better? Only the ability to do this all in the blink of an eye!

The USPS is facing a very real business challenge. As the number of "wired" people in the world grows, the number of traditional postal customers declines. Factor in the enormous difficulties of scaling the existing "pickup, sort, and deliver" process, and it doesn't take a philatelist to see that the USPS is fighting a losing battle. Or is it? Clearly, the USPS has a serious problem on its hands. Not surprisingly, TPF can provide the USPS with a very practical solution.

Internet Mail is the combination of SMTP (Simple Mail Transport Protocol), POP3 (Post Office Protocol), and IMAP4 (Internet Mail Access Protocol). As most if not all browsers today support Mail, there is a ready-made user interface that TPF can take advantage of. Imagine millions of email users running on a single TPF system - a TPF system that provides price/performance and reliability, thereby eliminating the need for the customer to maintain large numbers of email and/or GroupWare servers, and eliminating the need to duplicate the functionality of sophisticated GroupWare packages. We have the technology today!

The Postal Service is unique. The services, privacy assurance, and protections they provide to their personal and business customers are unmatched anywhere else in the world! The TPF solution is an opportunity for the USPS to maintain these preeminent standards, and at the same time aggressively manage their bold entrance onto the email playing field. Why consider any other option under the circumstances?