



The Intelligent Mail Barcode and You

By Michael Maguire

Is your mail ready for the most significant postal change in years?

You've probably heard, or possibly even used, one of these infamous little white lies sometime in your life:

- The check is in the mail.
- The dog ate my homework.
- We can still be friends.

Although we doubt the authenticity or even the possibility of the last two statements, tracking checks and other First Class or Standard mail is now a very real possibility. Easy access to your documents' whereabouts as they make their way through the mail stream is just one of the many benefits of the new Intelligent Mail Barcode (IMB). This technology created by the U.S. Postal Service (USPS) and provided by mailing industry hardware and software suppliers not only makes tracking easy and accessible, it improves delivery, alerts you of rerouted mail, and cleans up the look of your addressed direct mail.

WHAT IS THE IMB?

Chances are you've been using the common POSTNET barcode for a number of years to take advantage of automation-based postal discounts and increase the speed and delivery accuracy of direct-mail marketing campaigns. You may have even used the additional PLANET Code to track bulk mailing drops. The IMB combines both of those functions in a single barcode and adds even more features. It uses four different vertical bars. The postal barcode you use now has two different vertical bars. This allows the IMB to offer more information, information that can be used by the mailing organization in a number of ways, to include tracking mail.

This system of symbols (or symbology) provides mailers a "space" in the barcode to add their own unique serial number. In effect, every piece of mail can have its own social security number or digital ID. What

makes this interesting is that the information, as long as it's unique, is pretty much up to the mailer. It could be a subscriber number with a termination date, a source code, a particular direct-mail campaign description, or any other unique identifier. A direct-mail marketing manager could get very creative with this opportunity to identify particular mailpieces with the availability of digits within the IMB and the demographics of a mailing list.

TWO FLAVORS

The IMB can be used in two ways: Basic IMB, which requires the IMB to be printed on the mailpieces only, and Full Service IMB where the barcode is included on mailpieces, postal documentation, and tray or bag tags. The difference in preparation translates to a difference in postal discounts. Full Service IMB offers a greater discount, however it requires additional preparation. Discuss

which program makes the most business sense for you with your mailing system supplier.

IMB BENEFITS

There are a number of benefits associated with converting to the IMB and all of them revolve around one key improvement in barcode technology—more information represented by more and different types of bars. The IMB uses a system of symbols that allows up to 31 digits of information in 65 bars of four different lengths and position. Compare this to the POSTNET barcode that contains 11 digits of data in 62 bars of two lengths.

Mailers can now track the progress of individual mailpieces via the OneCode Confirm postal program. This means that IMB data can be used to anticipate in-home dates and coordinate marketing efforts associated with a direct-mail campaign. Marketing managers can also immediately determine the quality and accuracy of mailing lists by identifying what mailpieces are rerouted and returned.

Mailpiece “real estate” is increased by eliminating the need for multiple barcodes and other postal text. Not only does this provide more room for creativity, the delivery address looks cleaner and more personal. This is important if you use postcards as your main marketing media because every line counts. Postcard mailers should incorporate the IMB immediately if for no other reason than increasing the readability and effectiveness of the document.

The IMB also makes it easy to participate in a number of USPS programs using a single barcode and allows mailers to enjoy the lowest possible postal automation rates. In addition, it enables easy access to the OneCode ACS (Address Change Service) program from the USPS, providing mailers with updated address information whenever mail is forwarded or returned. This is “last-mile” assurance that your list is, or can be, updated with the most current address information.

WHEN DO YOU HAVE TO DO THIS?

The USPS has been accepting mail with the IMB for some time now, but as of May 2009, the stakes got a bit higher. Mailers using the IMB began enjoying a greater postal discount that month. As mentioned earlier, there are different discounts for Full Service IMB versus Basic IMB. Because rates and discounts aren't final until the actual date of implementation, visit www.usps.com or visit your local USPS Business Service Center for the rate and discount structure.

The POSTNET barcode will be retired in May 2011 and won't be accepted as a method for obtaining postal automation discounts after that time. Revising mission-critical internal processes for mail processing doesn't happen overnight and will probably involve a number of departments and department managers. The message is clear: The time to start the conversion to the IMB is now. Not only will you qualify for postal discounts and have access to a number of tracking and delivery enhancement features, all will be ready for the mandatory change in 2011.

WHAT SHOULD YOU DO NOW?

The first step is contacting the Mail Piece Design Analyst at your local USPS Business Service Center to get your unique Mailer ID for the IMB. Remember that the new barcode can support more data. This ID number will be part of the data represented in the IMB. This is one of the ways your mail is assigned to you and makes it visible for tracking.

If you would like to embed the IMB into your own native application, you can download the specifics for the barcode font, encoder, and guides for numerical content from the USPS RIBBS Website at <http://ribbs.usps.gov/OneCodeSolution/>. This is the option for those doing their own software programming and creating their own database and mailing list structure and operations.

For most of us who use one of the popular mailing and address management software

packages, much of that work has been done already, making it simple to use the IMB. In the address layout design feature of your mail management software, you'll remove the POSTNET barcode and add the IMB. Remember, you might now be able to eliminate address lines such as the PLANET Code or Address Service Requested because that information is now part of the IMB. You'll need to add the Mailer ID you obtained from your Mail Piece Design Analyst as it will be represented in the new barcode.

WHAT'S NEXT?

As mailers adapt to this new, robust technology, look for creative and interesting uses for the unique IMB beyond what has been mentioned here. Look for delivery information from the IMB to automatically feed intelligence for production scheduling and just-in-time mailpiece creation. Look for that information to automatically trigger the scheduling of retail staffing levels based on where the “Big Sale Flyer” is in the mail stream and when it's anticipated to hit the local market. The same could be said for call center staffing. Why bring in the whole call center team today when national distribution of the mailer won't happen until two days from now?

The POSTNET barcode shepherded in the automated mailing era of the 1990s. It's served us well and saved us millions of dollars in postage. Expect the IMB to provide a higher level of intelligence, mail tracking, and address correction. Not only will the IMB allow us to continue to mail at the lowest postal rates, this new intelligence provides better mail marketing accountability and deliverability and will help manage labor and back-office costs as well. S

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