



Association for Postal Commerce

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THE POST: AN ENGINE OF COMMERCE

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There's an interesting publication in U.S. bookstores these days. It was written by one of the New York Times' premiere writers, Thomas Friedman, and on the topic that "The World Is Flat." His thesis is that with the proliferation of electronic communication technologies all over the world, skills and the resources needed for those skills can be located anywhere in the world, and no longer need be restricted to resources available locally. In other words, the way in which many people communicate and do business is undergoing a transformation that could lessen the value of any usual way of doing business.

These ways of communicating and doing business stand as a challenge to the continued viability and relevance of posts. Posts across the world have tried to respond to these challenges, but, for the most part, their responses have been lacking. Most have opted to undergo extensive organizational transformations in the hope that evolving from a state-owned post, government agency into some form of corporate enterprise would prove to be an elixir for what is ailing modern posts.

Corporate and organizational transformation, however, is often not enough to ensure the future well-being of any postal operator, particularly if those who run the post fail to understand the role they must be prepared to play in the 21st century.

Postal operators are stewards who are charged to provide an economic infrastructural service that is part of a nation's economic well-being. Twenty-first century posts will survive only if they *facilitate* the transaction of communication and commerce by offering services that are reliable, cost-efficient, and transparent.

The meaning of *reliable* and *cost-efficient* should be self-evident, but perhaps the best way of understanding *transparent* is by analogy. For instance, when you flip the light switch on the wall in well-developed countries you don't have to wonder whether the lights will turn on. When you turn the faucet on the sink, you don't have to debate whether will water will flow. The same should also be the case with mail. When an item is mailed, the sender

shouldn't have to worry about if or when the recipient will receive it. The post should operate in a manner that simply requires the sender to do business, and not to dwell on how a postal system operates.

Most of the companies that choose to use the mail for key parts of their business don't believe they're in the "mail business" and would prefer not to be. They typically view themselves in other ways, i.e., as "direct merchants," "catalog merchants," "publishers," or "financial institutions." And even when they identify themselves as in the "mail order" business, that doesn't necessarily mean they want to spend a great deal of time or energy dealing with the vagaries of a post.

The post to them is a vehicle to an end. Just as they don't think much about taking this highway or another to go from point A to point B, they don't want to think much about getting mail, money, or packages from a point of origin to a point of destination. Consequently, when a post begins to ask itself what must it do to grow its volumes or revenue, the first thing it must do is to take a look at what "users" of the mail actually expect. And, if you want to know what mail users want, you've must first ask them and then you've got to be prepared to hear what they say, and tailor your programs and services around their business needs, and not just the needs of the post.

Here are just a few of the things that businesses need from whatever post with which they happen to do business.

- **BE INVISIBLE.** If mail must go from one city to the next, one regional to another, or must cross borders from one nation to another, the post must be prepared to deal with the complexities and vagaries of mail intake, processing, transport and distribution without making extraordinary demands on customers. When you put an ad in a newspaper or place an ad on television, you don't need to master the intricacies of newspaper publishing or television broadcasting to have your ad appear. You shouldn't have to become a "postal expert" to do business with the post either.
- **BE TRANSPARENT.** Companies that use mail for communication and commerce often build other aspects of their operations around an assumption that mail will be delivered in a timely way and exactly as promised. Sometimes that's a difficult thing for a post to do. Consequently, any post that wants to continue to win this business must be prepared to share with its customers as much information as possible regarding "where is my mail in the system." Express-courier companies strive to satisfy this particular business need using track-and-trace systems based on electronic information technologies linked to barcodes (and soon) radio-frequency identification tags.

For some posts, this represents a significant challenge. But, posts can find and use some less technologically sophisticated ways of communicating this much-needed information on where the mail is and when it will be or has been delivered.

- **BE INSTRUCTIVE.** If you're interested in attracting business from commercial enterprises, be prepared to help people understand how to make best and most effective use of the mail. Take the time and energy to explain the value of mail as a

business communications and transactional tool in way that facilitate busy business people understanding how mail can be used to make their own businesses thrive and grow. Don't talk to me about why I need to make mail compatible with your systems. Talk to me about how doing something can make my business more profitable.

- **BE COMPREHENSIVE.** If a business is interested in using mail as one of its business transactional tools, chances are it will need other services associated with its everyday business needs. Among these could very well be: systems for money transfer, access to credit, warehousing and logistical assistance, an ability to make communicating by hard-copy printed messages and electronic messages a smooth, bi-directional experience. Key to doing so, of course, is the development and maintenance of address information systems. Do you have an address coding system that facilitates mail delivery? Do you have an address system that enables a business to know when customers have moved, and get their mail to where it must go?
- **BE A LEADER.** Businesses want to do business with "leaders." So lead! And do it by example. Businesses need information on how to access and use postal services. Make sure you have the necessary information available in a form that best meets the diverse needs of your marketplace. If you've got a web site, does it represent best interactive practices. If you've got information in print or in some other form, how easy is it to get and use this information?
- **BE INNOVATIVE.** Find out what businesses need, and be prepared to tailor your services to them. The days of saying "here's what I have; what do you want to buy" are over. Your attitude *should* be "what do you need, and let me build it for you."
- **BE A GOOD PUPIL AND A GOOD TEACHER.** One sure way for building bi-directional communication between a post and its customers is to develop some sort of "executive exchange." Walk a mile in the other guy's shoes, and you'll quickly learn of the needs and challenges he faces each day. Posts need to know about what makes mail-using businesses tick. Similarly, mailers need to know more (first-hand) about the challenges that face a post. Only when the two work together in an interested and responsive relationship will both parties profit.
- **BE SMARTLY FLEXIBLE.** The job of a post is to serve as an engine for commerce and communication. There is no rule that says every facet of doing that must be done by the post and the post alone. Partnering (outsourcing) with those within the private sector who have the capital and resources to better accomplish a task is a smart thing to consider in order to get that engine of commerce rolling. Worksharing with mailers and mail service providers has proven to be a remarkable facet of the postal system in the U.S. Other posts are only beginning to discover the value and benefits of outsourcing, worksharing, and down-stream access. Get at the front of this innovative business curve before deregulation and de-monopolization enables your competitors to beat you to the punch.

Remember your actual reason for being. You're there as a post to *facilitate*, not *impede* communication and commerce. You'll know when you're doing this well, because

customers will seek *you* out because you represent an unbeatable business proposition. Keep in mind that if you can't seem to figure out why your customers are leaving you for alternative media and ways of doing business, chances are it's because you have failed to understand and satisfy the changing needs of your marketplace.