

# Computer Corner

## Neither Snow Nor Rain Nor Hard Drive Crash? Communication in 2014



I'm the youngest of four kids; I was born as a big surprise to my folks late in life. My mom is ninety-six. The other day I took her to the funeral of a friend of hers who passed at 103. Hazel was born in 1910. Think of the changes that Hazel, and for that matter my mom, have seen.

Ma Bell Telephone's slogan from 1979, "Reach out and touch someone" was decades away when those ladies came into this world. If anyone in their family wanted to reach out and touch someone they would walk or run, or hitch up the wagon or buggy or mount old Nellie and head over in person. For that far away "someone" there was the mail, or, on special occasions, the telegraph.

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Even with all the communication inventions and technologies that have come along since 1917, businesses still rely on the United States Postal Service for many of their communication needs. Most utility billing in this country still depends on the postman, though that has been changing, and continues to change.

Why? Well, for one thing, we don't wait thirteen years to see a postal increase. As of January 27, 2013 a first class stamp was 46 cents and as of the same date in 2014 the rate went to 49 cents. Of course there are some steps businesses can take to decrease the cost, like sending postcards rather than letters. Postage for postcards went from 33 cents in 2013 to thirty-four for 2014.

Sending a postcard is a way anyone can reduce costs, but usually very small utility systems don't do postcards because of the cost of postcard stock and printing. By that I mean that having postcards printed is like having custom Tee shirts made. If the order is for 2,000 Tee shirts, the price per shirt will be much lower than if only ten shirts are ordered. Larger utilities have the advantage of volume discounting by placing larger orders than a small utility.

In 1991, the Postal Service offered discounted rates to mailers who pre-barcoded their mail, which then could bypass multiline OCRs, saving the Postal Service time and money — savings passed on to the mailers. CASS (Coding Accuracy Support System) is the Postal Service certification program designed to improve the accuracy of ZIP + 4 codes, five-digit ZIP codes, and carrier route codes that appear on addresses. It means that addresses have been checked for accuracy against the Postal Service's database using an approved system.

In the last few years utility office personnel returned home from postal seminars with worried faces as they learned of changes about to take place at rapidly approaching deadlines. Those deadlines have been pushed back several times and the new rules have become increasingly confusing as there has been a great deal of misinformation about the new USPS business mailing requirements.

### Meeting postal requirements

The first thing to understand is that utility bills are considered First Class Mail. No one is being forced to change anything concerning mailings of standard First Class Mail whether they are Letter Bills or Postcards. Whether a water district or city has been doing nothing special to attain any Postal discounts or earning some savings through a postal presort program like Cass Mail Certification service and certificate, or using the new Full-Service Intelligent Mail barcode (IMb™) or even using the old Postnet barcode, they can continue to do just as they have been doing. No one can force a change of any of these procedures, at least at this time. However, the utilities may no longer receive the discount they were used to.

The Postal Reorganization Act of 1970 gave birth to the PRC or Postal Regulatory Commission. The Commission is an independent agency that has exercised regulatory

oversight over the Postal Service since its creation. Initially, that oversight consisted primarily of conducting public, on-the-record hearings concerning proposed rates, mail classification or major service changes, and recommending decisions for action by the Postal Governors.

The Postal Accountability and Enhancement Act (PAEA) enacted on December 20, 2006, significantly strengthened the Commission's authority to serve as a counterbalance to new flexibility granted to the Postal Service in setting postal rates. The Act requires the Commission to develop and maintain regulations for a modern system of rate regulation, consult with the Postal Service on delivery service standards and performance measures, consult with the Department of State on international postal policies, prevent cross-subsidization or other anticompetitive postal practices, promote transparency and accountability, and adjudicate complaints.



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Many people are under the impression that the new rules the post office is attempting are mandatory. While the post office did try to obligate everyone to enroll, the PRC put a stop to that. In fact, due to a PRC ruling in 2013, the Postal Service is delaying the Jan. 26, 2014 implementation of the Full-Service IMb™ requirement for automation price discounts. Regardless what anyone may have heard or even been told by a postmaster, NONE of these changes can be forced on ANYONE, but, there may be steps a utility system should take in order to receive certain postal discounts. For instance, a water district that is using outdated software and still using the old postnet barcode can continue to do so, but will realize no special savings in doing so, while post office customers who use the newer version, known as the Basic IMb™ (Intelligent Mail Barcode), will continue

to receive the discounts they have been getting even if they don't enroll in the even newer Full-Service IMb™ program that was scheduled for Jan. 26,

2014. However, if they don't enroll they won't get the new additional three tenths of a cent per piece item discount. Of course, considering the miniscule nature of that savings, it may not be a concern.

The mailer's software must be able to print the Basic IMb™ to qualify for ANY automation discounts. This is likely to mean investing in an upgrade for those that have not kept up-to-date. Again, the old Postnet barcode can still be used but it won't provide any discount.

The CASS certification program, mentioned earlier, only validates Zip Codes and does not meet the new address correction requirement. No discount will be given if there is no means for obtaining corrected or updated addresses. This can simply be a statement "ADDRESS SERVICE REQUESTED" printed on the billing card. When a card is returned, the clerk types the corrected address into the billing system. Or, corrections may be obtained automatically using the USPS IMsb online software, or a mail certification service. The new rules state that addresses must be updated and verified every 90 days. However, "Address Service Requested" printed on the card is an acceptable and simple means of meeting this requirement.

A list of IMb™ Service Type Codes is available at [www.Ribbs.usps.gov](http://www.Ribbs.usps.gov). Typically, a water system will use the Service Type Code of 700, which is the number that represents First Class mailings.

Electronically submitting the Form 3600 Postage Statements via Postal Wizard can be accomplished after registration at the USPS Small Business Gateway at [www.gateway.usps.com](http://www.gateway.usps.com). The Wizard will help the user fill out the required forms.

One could instead use the Postal Service IMsb Software Tool, which will also aid in filling out the forms but in addition takes the user through the entire First Class Full-Service IMb™ automation process.

To give some idea how prolonged these postal changes have been, there is a March 2011 article in the *The Kansas Lifeline* magazine detailing the Intelligent Barcode Requirements. This information is still valid today and can be viewed by going on the Internet and typing

[www.krwa.net/lifeline/pastissues.shtml#1103](http://www.krwa.net/lifeline/pastissues.shtml#1103) in the address line. This will open the KRWA March 2011 issue, Table of Contents. Click on the page 58 article, "Computer Corner: Play It Smart – Prepare for Intelligent Barcode Requirements".

That article tells about going to the aforementioned post office site to obtain an MID (Mailer Identification), a number that will be needed to use Intelligent Mail of any variety. The USPS Business Customer Gateway can also provide the user with a CRID (Customer Registration Identification), a number which is necessary if one desires to also obtain the whopping three tenths of a cent discount provided by the new Full-Service IMb™.

If a water system is not interested in the three tenths of a cent savings provided by the Full-Service IMb™, they might opt to not bother with the elaborate IMsb online post office software. They could instead, simply use the Postal Wizard at the USPS online Business Customer Gateway, filling out the batch submittal document PS Form 3600 FCM1 online or printing it and manually filling it out on paper.

Access the form at [https://ribbs.usps.gov/intelligent\\_mail\\_schedule/documents/tech\\_guides/jan2012/docs/Jan2012\\_PS3600FCM.pdf](https://ribbs.usps.gov/intelligent_mail_schedule/documents/tech_guides/jan2012/docs/Jan2012_PS3600FCM.pdf).

If this form is not completed and handed in, NO automated discounts will be provided, including the CASS/Basic IMb™ discount which is substantial enough

most systems, mailing five hundred pieces or more, find the effort to be worthwhile.

The additional three tenths of a cent per item discount is only available to those sending five hundred or more pieces. Full-Service IMb™ also requires PS Form 3600 FCM1.

Once the IMsb tool leads one through the sort process, the download is certified as corrected and restored to one's utility billing software. The IMsb tool is used to print the certificate, calculate the amount due for the

mailing, and print the USPS Mail tray labels.

I find it amusing that the presort requirements talk about "Full-Service". It seems that all the service and in fact the job usually done by the post office, sorting the mail, is instead being done for the post office by the customer, so the customer is providing the "Full-Service".

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If local postmasters are found to give contradictory fuzzy or confusing information about the new requirements, ask the local postmaster for the name and contact information for the District Business Mail Entry Manager. While the USPS may be in the communication business, we have discovered that, by their own admission, many of the "in-the-know" executives with the post office have expressed concerns about the requirements not being well thought out and confusing, and not passed along to postal workers or the public with clarity.

My husband Merle and I interviewed a number of USPS officials around the nation in researching this article. Each of them declined to have their name used in the article, perhaps to avoid being deluged with calls and questions. The most useful review we ran across on the Internet was this link [www.http://blogs.pb.com/uspsnews/2013/11/30/breaking-news-full-service-intelligentmail-barcode-mandate-delayed](http://blogs.pb.com/uspsnews/2013/11/30/breaking-news-full-service-intelligentmail-barcode-mandate-delayed).

After successfully testing support for these new requirements in our latest utility billing software, we had several larger water systems inform us that for all the additional hassle to comply with the so-called Full-Service IMb™, they saved less than \$20 on 5,000 bills. As a result, they decided to just continue using their CASS with Basic IMb™ without bothering with the new smidgen of a discount requiring so much extra effort, the rules the post office had sought to make mandatory.



### Technological growing pains

While new technologies open up possibilities only imagined in science fiction, they are usually not without their downside. For example, we can't imagine being without our automobile. Yet, think of the poor blacksmiths put largely out of business by the horseless carriage. They had to adapt to the changing times.

The USPS is looking more and more like the blacksmith about the time the Tin Lizzie took to the roads. Blacksmiths were still needed for the many buggies and wagons and the like on the nation's roads, but with each passing year they found their services less in demand. So what to do? In order to eat, blacksmiths had to increase prices for the work they do get. Yet, the more they raised their prices the more affordable automobiles looked. In order to deal with a declining income as more and more written communication is taking place over the Internet, the USPS has closed many post offices around the country; that created a burden for many communities. The elimination of services along with the ever-increasing prices makes the alternatives more attractive.

Just the thought of nearly 50 cents per letter has more water systems considering Paperless Billing. This can be by several methods, including Email Bills, Internet Bill Payment or 'Web Pay', Automatic Banking such as ACH Payments. Internet Billing or ACH can still include paper bills to allow the customer to see the charges in print, or, the customer can view their bill online to achieve paperless billing and the savings it provides.

More and more baby boomers and members of the younger generations, not to mention those that are just naturally young at heart, are interested in paperless options as they are comfortable with using personal computers and mobile devices routinely in their daily lives.

Watch for the next "Computer Corner" article in the July 2014 issue of the *The Kansas Lifeline* for, as the Late Paul Harvey would say "The rest of the story", Paperless Billing, Communication in 2014.

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