Intelligent Mail® Barcode

The next generation of USPS® barcode technology

“Provide end-to-end visibility and a seamless process for mail acceptance and delivery using standardized intelligent barcodes, continuous mail tracking, and mail quality feedback in real time to position Letters and Flats as Key Communications Medium.”

Melissa Data
Your partner in data quality

March 17, 2008
# Intelligent Mail® Barcode

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1. “The Intelligent Mail Barcode: Key to the USPS' Future”
   By Gene Del Polito, Pres. of the Association for Postal Commerce
What is the Intelligent Mail Barcode?

In 2003, the United States Postal Service published the Intelligent Mail Corporate Plan. This plan identified several key strategies including:

- Uniquely Identify Mail and Mail Aggregates
- Develop and Deploy an Enabling Infrastructure
- Enhance Address Quality

The Intelligent Mail® Barcode, formerly referred to as the 4-State Customer Barcode, is a new Postal Service barcode used to sort and track letters and flats. It expands the ability to track individual mailpieces and provides customers with greater visibility into the mailstream.

The Intelligent Mail barcode was designed with innovation in mind enabling additional USPS services, new applications and future benefits.

How does it work?

The Intelligent Mail barcode combines the data of the existing POSTNET™ and the PLANET Code® barcodes, as well as other data, into a single, unique barcode to route and track domestic mail.

The 31-digit Intelligent Mail barcode (65 bars) is slightly longer than the 11-digit POSTNET barcode (62 bars). In July 2007, in response to concerned mailers about mailpiece real estate, the Postal Service published a revised specification for the Intelligent Mail barcode with even shorter bar heights with the full bar ranging in height between 0.125 and 0.165 inches.

The code is made up of four distinct vertical bar symbols (which is why it was once referred to as the 4-State Barcode): Tracker, Ascender, Descender, and Full (TADF).

Key specification tolerances:
- Overall barcode length between 2.667 & 3.225 inches
- Overall barcode height between 0.125 & 0.165 inches
- Vertical barcode clearance at least 0.028 inch
- Horizontal barcode clearance at least 0.125 inch

What are the attributes of the IM® barcode compared to other barcodes?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Attribute</th>
<th>11-digit POSTNET Barcode</th>
<th>13-digit PLANET Code Barcode</th>
<th>31-digit Intelligent Mail Barcode</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Number of bars</td>
<td>62</td>
<td>72</td>
<td>65</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bar Width</td>
<td>0.020 +/- 0.005 inch</td>
<td>0.020 +/- 0.005 inch</td>
<td>0.020 +/- 0.005 inch</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Horizontal Pitch</td>
<td>22 +/- 2 bars per inch</td>
<td>22 +/- 2 bars per inch</td>
<td>22 +/- 2 bars per inch</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Height of Full Bar</td>
<td>0.125 +/- 0.010 inch</td>
<td>0.125 +/- 0.010 inch</td>
<td>0.145 +/- 0.020 inch*</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*NOTE: Barcode height is based on Specification USPS-B-3200 Revision E. Earlier Specification USPS-B-3200 Revision C stipulated Intelligent Mail barcode Full Bar height at 0.182 +/- 0.048 inch.
What are the Fields in the Intelligent Mail barcode?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Field Name</th>
<th>Length</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>BARCODE IDENTIFIER</td>
<td>2 digit Tracking Code</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>This field is reserved for future use to specify the presort makeup. If you currently do not use an Optional Endorsement Line (OEL), you will simply populate this field with “00”.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SERVICE TYPE IDENTIFIER</td>
<td>3 digit Tracking Code</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>This field is used to request special services such as tracking or address correction. Example: “040” is First-Class Mail with Destination Confirm. If you are not requesting special services on the mailpiece, you would use one of the following codes depending upon the class of mail to which the Intelligent Mail barcode is applied: 700 for First-Class Mail; 702 for Standard Mail; 704 for Periodicals; 706 for Bound Printed Matter.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MAILER IDENTIFIER (MID)</td>
<td>6 or 9*-digit Tracking Code</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Depending on annual mail volumes</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A number assigned by the USPS that identifies the specific mailer or subscriber. The USPS will issue you a 9-digit or a 6-digit Mailers ID based on your mail volume. See section XIII for more information on Mailer ID.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SEQUENCE or SERIAL NUMBER</td>
<td>9 or 6*-digit Tracking Code</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Depending on annual mail volumes. You can use this field to uniquely identify your individual mailpieces. If you are assigned a 9-digit MID, you will have 6 digits to identify and number your mailpieces. If you are assigned a 6-digit MID, you will have 9 digits to identify and number your mailpieces. This mailpiece ID must remain unique for each 45-day period.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DELIVERY POINT ZIP CODE</td>
<td>0, 5, 9 or 11-digit Routing Code</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The same data used to generate the current POSTNET barcode. Populate this field with delivery point ZIP Code of the mailpiece.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The Intelligent Mail barcode

```
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>6-digit Mailer Identifier</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 11 12 13 14 15 16 17 18 19 20 21 22 23 24 25 26 27 28 29 30 31</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
```

The POSTNET barcode

```
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>9-digit Mailer Identifier</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 11 12 13 14 15 16 17 18 19 20 21 22 23 24 25 26 27 28 29 30 31</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
```
What services use the Intelligent Mail barcode?

- The Intelligent Mail barcode now supports the following services for automation-rate letters and flats:
  - OneCode Confirm
  - OneCode ACS

- The Postal Service allows mailers to use the Intelligent Mail barcode on automation-rate First-Class Mail®, Standard Mail®, Periodicals, and Bound Printed Matter letters and flats for rate eligibility in lieu of POSTNET barcodes.

- The Postal Service allows First-Class Mail, Standard Mail, and Periodicals letters and flats with Intelligent Mail barcodes to participate in OneCode Confirm and OneCode ACS. See

- The Postal Service will continue to support the use of POSTNET barcode for encoding the delivery point barcode, the PLANET Code barcode for encoding tracking information for Confirm, and alphanumeric characters for conveying participant code and Keyline information for ACS.

- To facilitate the adoption of the Intelligent Mail barcode, the USPS has developed, and is making available at no charge, a web-based, interactive encoder-decoder tool, and an extensive library of encoding software and fonts suitable for encoding and printing the Intelligent Mail barcode in mail production environments using selected operating systems and printing architectures.

- The new requirement not only covers mailpiece barcodes, but also new codes for trays and containers, plus the electronic submission of postage statements using Mail.dat®, Wizard Web Services, or Postage Statement Wizard®.

What about automation discounts?

- Mailers using the Intelligent Mail barcode can qualify for automation discounts as long as all other automation requirements are met including meeting addressing, readability, and other requirements for processing on automated equipment.

- The Intelligent Mail barcode must contain a proper routing ZIP Code™ and a valid Mailer ID* to satisfy the automation discount criteria. *See Mailer ID section XI for details.

- Mailers printing the Intelligent Mail barcode solely to qualify for the automation discount must populate the Service Type ID field with one of the following values:
  - 700 for First-Class Mail
  - 702 for Standard Mail
  - 704 for Periodicals
  - 706 for Bound Printed Matter

- Remittance and reply mail, such as CRM, MRM, and QBRM may use the Intelligent Mail barcode by populating the Service Type ID field with the First-Class Mail designation.

- Mailers not using the IM barcode could be paying up to an extra nine cents for every piece mailed.
VII  What is necessary to generate the Intelligent Mail barcode on Mailpieces?

- Work with your mail service providers (Melissa Data’s MAILERS+4 is IMB Basic compatible)
- Decide what data will be included in your Intelligent Mail barcode
- Download Encoding Software to translate your data into the Intelligent Mail barcode*
- Download the appropriate font to print the barcode on your mailpiece*
- Be sure your printer is ready
- Get more help from http://ribbs.usps.gov/ or
- Talk to your Mailpiece Design Analyst

*(not necessary if using mailing software that already includes this).

VIII  What is necessary to generate the Intelligent Mail Tray barcode?

- Work with your presort software vendor or mail service provider
  (Melissa Data’s MAILERS+4 is IMB compatible)
- Check size of label stock
- Get more help from http://ribbs.usps.gov/ or
- Talk to your Mailpiece Design Analyst

IX  What is necessary to generate the Intelligent Mail Container barcode?

- Work with your presort software vendor or mail service provider
- Get more help from http://ribbs.usps.gov/ or
- Talk to your Mailpiece Design Analyst
To capitalize on the value of information about mail, the Postal Service and its customers will place an information-rich code on all mail, aggregates of mail, and business forms, enabling end-to-end visibility into the mailstream.

What are the different types of Intelligent Mail barcodes?

The Postal Service and its customers will place an information-rich code on all mail, aggregates of mail, and business forms, enabling end-to-end visibility into the mail stream that will:

- Uniquely identify the sender
- Uniquely identify the mailpiece or aggregate
- Include a ZIP Code for sortation & routing
- Include Product, Special Service, or other Unique indicators

What is the Mailer ID?

- The Mailer ID (MID) is a field within the Intelligent Mail barcodes that is used to identify Mail Owners and/or Mailing Agents. Mailer IDs are used in the Intelligent Mail barcode, Intelligent Mail Tray barcode, Intelligent Mail Container barcode, and Intelligent Mail Package barcode.

- The USPS assigns the Mailer ID—either a 9-digit field or a 6-digit field—based on the annual mail volume:
  - A Mail Owner who mails 10 million or more pieces annually will be assigned a 6-digit MID.
  - A Mail Owner who mails less than 10 million pieces annually will be assigned a 9-digit MID.
  - A Mailing Agent at a location which mails 10 million or more pieces annually will be assigned one 6-digit MID.
  - A Mailing Agent at a location which mails less than 10 million pieces annually will be assigned one 9-digit MID.

- Mailers who do not plan to subscribe to OneCode Confirm or OneCode ACS, can obtain their Mailer IDs by contacting one of the following:
  - For letters and flats: Mailpiece Design Analyst (MDA) via http://pe.usps.gov/mpdesign/mpdfr_mda_intro.asp
  - For packages: Confirmation Services Help Desk: 1-877-264-9693

- To subscribe to one of the services, contact the appropriate toll-free number:
  - OneCode Confirm 1-877-640-0724
  - OneCode ACS 1-800-331-5746
What options are available for using the Intelligent Mail barcode?

Mailers will be required in May 2009 to meet one of two options using Intelligent Mail barcodes to access automation prices for letters and flats.

- **Full Service Intelligent Mail** will require the use of unique Intelligent Mail barcodes applied to letter and flat mailpieces, trays, sacks, and containers, such as pallets.
  - Mailers will also be required to submit their postage statements and mailing documentation electronically using Mail.dat, Wizard Web Services, or the Postage Statement Wizard – all transmitting data through the Postal Service's PostalOne! system.
  - For drop-ship mailings and all origin-entered mail verified at a detached mail unit (DMU), mailers will be required to schedule appointments online using the Facility Access and Shipment Tracking (FAST®) system or may submit appointment requests through PostalOne! FAST Web Services using the Transaction Messaging (TM) specifications. The convenient messaging protocol allows customers to automate the appointment scheduling process and receive electronic information about their appointments from the Postal Service.

- **Basic Intelligent Mail** will only require mailers to apply Intelligent Mail barcodes on letter and flat mailpieces in place of the POSTNET barcode.
  - Automation prices will no longer be available for the use of POSTNET barcodes (May 2010).
  - Intelligent Mail barcodes are not required for trays and containers.

What are the requirements for Basic Intelligent Mail option?

**Mailpiece barcode:** The 31-digit Intelligent Mail barcode will be required on letter and flat mailpieces.

Mailers will be required to include the delivery point routing code in the barcode. The USPS will issue a Mailer ID to each mailer for use in the Intelligent Mail barcodes. Mailers must include this USPS-assigned Mailer ID in all Intelligent Mail barcodes. In most circumstances, mailers will be expected to use the mail owner’s ID in their Intelligent Mail barcodes.

Mailers will not be required to uniquely number their mailpieces. Mailers will simply populate the Intelligent Mail barcode with the Mailer ID, delivery point routing code, the class of mail (service type identifier), and OEL – if an OEL is printed on the mailpiece.

Mailers using pressure sensitive barcoded presort labels will not be required to include this information in the Intelligent Mail barcode.

Mailers will be required to schedule an appointment electronically using the FAST system for drop-ship mailings. Mailers may schedule appointments online using the FAST web site, or they may submit appointment requests through PostalOne! FAST Web Services using the Transaction Messaging (TM) specifications.
What are the requirements for Full Service Intelligent Mail option?

**Mailpiece barcode:** The 65-bar Intelligent Mail barcode, which accommodates 31-digits of data, will be required on letter and flat mailpieces. This barcode is used to sort and track letters and flats and will include the delivery point routing code. Unlike the POSTNET barcode that only contains the routing code, the Intelligent Mail barcode contains additional fields that encode special services, identify the mailer and the class of mail, and uniquely number the mailpiece.

The USPS will issue a Mailer ID to each mailer for use in their Intelligent Mail barcodes. In most circumstances, mailers will be expected to use the mail owner’s Mailer ID in all Intelligent Mail barcodes. Mailers will be required to uniquely number each mailpiece in a mailing and the number cannot be reused for a period of 45 days from the date of induction.

Alternatives to this requirement, such as using the same number on all mailpieces in a mailing or the same number on all mailpieces in a handling unit (tray, sack or bundle) may allow for the collection of similarly-detailed data, but will require USPS approval.

**Tray barcode:** An Intelligent Mail tray barcode will be required on letter trays, flat trays and sacks. Unlike the current 10-digit tray barcode that only contains routing information, the 24-digit Intelligent Mail tray barcode includes additional fields to identify the mailer and uniquely number each tray or sack. Mailers will be required to uniquely number each tray or sack in a mailing, and the number cannot be reused for a period of 45 days from the date of induction.

**Container barcode:** An Intelligent Mail container barcode will be required on all containers used to transport mail such as pallets, all purpose containers (APCs), rolling stock, gaylords, etc. This 21-digit Intelligent Mail container barcode includes fields to identify the mailer and uniquely number each container. Mailers will be required to uniquely number each container in a mailing, and the number cannot be reused for a period of 45 days from the date of induction.

**Additional available mailing information with Full-Service Option:**
- Offers mailers better visibility into the mailstream
- Expand the ability of mailers to track individual pieces, handling units and containers
- Receiver information about mail preparation and address quality
- Determine when a mailing was inducted to the postal system

What are the deadlines for implementing the Intelligent Mail barcode?

Currently, the use of the Intelligent Mail barcode is optional. Because it offers significant advantages over POSTNET and PLANET Code barcodes, most customers have found it makes good business sense to adopt this new format now. Postal Service’s current plans are to require use of the Intelligent Mail barcode to quality for automation discounts beginning May 2009. This date was pushed back from January of 2009 to May of 2009 by Postmaster General John Potter on March 5th with the added recommendation that use of the POSTNET barcode remain eligible for an automation price until May 2010. Those prices will be announced with the May 2009 change.
What methods are available for electronic data transfer?

The Postal Service has been enhancing its ability to exchange data with customers electronically. Its proposal for the Full Service option includes the requirement to submit postage statements and mailing documentation electronically using one of three methods: Mail.dat, Wizard Web Services, or the Postage Statement Wizard – all transmitting data through the Postal Service’s PostalOne! System. That system also can use mailer-supplied information to automate postage payment and give the mailer 24/7 access to mailing documentation and financial transaction information. Electronic information is used for verification, acceptance, and payment.

1. **Mail.dat** is the most advanced method. Mail.dat information uses industry-standard electronic file formats developed by IDEAlliance to facilitate communication of mailing information to the Postal Service. Mailing information is sent over a secure connection to the PostalOne! System where it is stored and used to generate documentation to support verification and payment.

2. The **Wizard Web Service** is part of the overall PostalOne! application and provides customers with the capability of submitting mailing documents through the Internet using a Web service over a secure connection with the Postal Service. The Wizard Web Service uses a Simple Object Access Protocol (SOAP) to submit information in an extensible Markup Language (XML) format that ensures that the data can be sent and received by applications written in various languages and deployed on various platforms. Mailing information is send via Wizard Web Services to the PostalOne! System where it is stored and used to generate documentation to support verification and payment.

3. The **Postage Statement Wizard Service** is an online tool that allows mailers to enter their postage statement information using a secure PostalOne! account. The Postage Statement Wizard verifies completed information for an online postage statement and automatically populates the Permit Holder section of the postage statement based on the account number provided. It guides the user through the items needed to complete the statement. The Postage Statement Wizard automatically calculates the postage and validates information entered. Once the postage statement is completed online, the electronic statements will be submitted directly to the acceptance unit.

“Just as the POSTNET barcode ushered in a new mailing era in the early ‘90s, you can expect the IMB to bring another level of intelligence, tacking and ACS into the mailing world.

Dave Lewis, president & cofounder of trackmymail.com

How does the USPS benefit from the Intelligent Mail barcode?

- The new barcode creates a platform for intelligence-based services that add value to the mailstream, and makes it easier to access OneCode ACS and OneCode Confirm.

- The Intelligent Mail barcodes provide the USPS with better visibility into each mailer’s operation. As each mail piece can now be tracked back to a specific sender, the USPS will be able to accurately assess which mailers are updating their lists for changes of address, and properly sorting, traying and preparing their mail according to USPS specifications.

- Additional costs to the Postal Service for redirecting mail can be tracked back to the specific mailers.
How do mailers benefit from the Intelligent Mail barcode?

- Adds speed, quality and accuracy to the entire process of mail delivery.
- Adds a new level of control to mail tracking and address change service.
- Has a greater overall data capacity than existing barcodes and provides mailers with more digits for their use, allowing for unique identification of up to a billion mailpieces per mailing.
- Provides more accurate and detailed information about mailings which can enable better decision making. Mailers will be able to track the progress of individual mail pieces enabling them to anticipate in-home dates and coordinate other marketing efforts with that mailing.
- With streamlined address correction and piece-level tracking, it will help eliminate undeliverable and returned mail – and the associated costs. Mailers will be able to immediately determine the quality and accuracy of mailing lists by identifying what mail pieces are rerouted and returned.
- Mailers know if and when mail gets delivered. Mail that is redirected by the Postal Service is now easily identified. Mailers can request address change service information in the barcode at a greatly reduced cost. (Many aspects of the delivery tracing expectations that FedEx and UPS have created are now met by the Postal Service, but at a dramatically lower cost.)
- Mailers will be able to easily comply with the upcoming move-update requirements for Standard Mail® as well as those already in place for First-Class Mail®.
- Mailers will have increased visibility into the performance of the Postal Service, leveraging the same technology that will be used by the USPS to meet the service measurement requirements set forth by the Postal Accountability and Enhancement Act.
- Allows for participation in multiple USPS service programs with a single barcode. Enables participation in the new USPS Seamless Acceptance program which will eliminate the need to run mail through MERLIN®.
- Increases mailpiece “real estate” by eliminating the need for multiple barcodes using one standardized barcode for a cleaner, consistent, more visually impactful address block.

Current label uses four lines for ACS, POSTNET, and PLANET Code services.

New Intelligent Mail barcode uses one line for combined services and other data.
What are some of the most frequently asked questions and concerns expressed by mailers?

**Question:** What is the cost of utilizing the IM® barcode program?

**Answer:** Right now, there is no set cost. But full implementation of the IM barcode will require considerable investment, notes the MFSA. But stay tuned … the Postal Service will most likely address the cost issue later this year.

**Question:** Do OneCode Confirm™ subscribers have to obtain a new Mailer ID (MID) for use with the IM barcode?

**Answer:** According to the USPS, no. The Postal Service is transitioning all systems to support the 6-digit and 9-digit MID formats for use with the IM barcode. Those who are currently OneCode Confirm subscribers will have a “0” appended to the beginning of the subscriber ID for use as an MID in the IM barcode. You can use the Service Type indicator in the IM barcode to selectively enable the OneCode Confirm service.

**Question:** What if I’m not a OneCode Confirm subscriber, but have been assigned a 9-digit Mailer ID for use with the IM barcode, can I use this same ID to obtain tracking information on my mailpieces if I later purchase the OneCode Confirm service?

**Answer:** No, says the Postal Service. According to the USPS, it’s working to support this issue in the future. Currently, the Postal Service assigns a new 6-digit Confirm subscriber ID when you purchase the OneCode Confirm service and you will need to use this subscriber ID for pieces that you wish to enable for Confirm tracking.

**Question:** If I’m already signed up for OneCode ACS™ and have received a 6-digit subscriber ID, can I use this same ID on my IM barcode even if I don’t want to subscribe to OneCode ACS for all mailpieces?

**Answer:** Yes. According to the USPS, you can use your OneCode ACS subscriber ID as the MID in your IM barcode and use the “Service Type Identifier” field in the IM barcode to turn on and off OneCode ACS.

**Question:** I’ve been assigned a 9-digit ID for use in the IM barcode, but can I buy OneCode ACS and continue to use this 9-digit ID to purchase OneCode ACS for my mailpieces?

**Answer:** The USPS notes that yes, you will be able to use your 9-digit MID in your IM barcode to purchase OneCode ACS. The Postal Service says it will accommodate 9-digit Mailer ID’s for use in OneCode ACS.

**Question:** I’m a OneCode ACS subscriber and uniquely barcode my mailpiece and it undergoes a change of address, will I get the original barcode information in addition to the changed barcode?

**Answer:** Yes and maybe, says the USPS. The Postal Service explains that OneCode ACS notices provided to you are designed to provide the entire 31 digits from the original IM barcode. Right now, a small percentage of OneCode ACS notices may not include the original barcode ID, Service Type and Delivery Point ZIP Code values. But this will all change – according to the USPS, the OneCode ACS notices will have all 31 digits from the original IM barcode by fall of 2008. In addition, both the new and old address information provided in the OneCode ACS record will be returned to you.

**Question:** I have DUNS number that I use for my Intelligent Mail® Package barcodes, do I have to get a different MID?
Answer: No. The USPS states that existing mail owners and mailing agents using their DUNS Numbers for identification in their Intelligent Mail Package barcodes will be allowed to continue their use of their 9-digit DUNS as their MID. These existing DUNS will be grand-fathered for mail owners and mailing agents to use only on their parcel mailings. The grand-fathered 9-digit DUNS who first digit is ‘0’ through ‘8’ is not allowed for use on mail owner and mailing agents Letter or Flat mail volume. If needed, a new MID will be assigned for use in the IM barcode on Letter and Flat mailings.

Question: What is the difference between “full service” and “basic service”?

Answer: According to the MFSA, the Postal Service does not explain what they expect “full service” mailers to have regarding planned vs. actual pieces in the mailing. The MFSA suggests that the exact requirements and error tolerances need to be detailed, as do other topics such as formats and postal systems that would supply address corrections and “start-the-clock” scans. The MFSA also states that “basic service” users to should have access to features like “Confirm.” The MFSA says it’s concerned that having “basic” and “full service” tiers will foreshadow an eventual distinction in rates. Some MFSA members note that a service provider or mail owner will be mandated to always operate in one tier, or if operation for different mailings will be allowed.

**Where can you find more information on the Intelligent Mail barcode, the the latest updates, and contributing editorials?**

- **OneCode Solution™ Intelligent Mail® Barcode Technical Resource Guide:** Published Sept 25, 2007 by the United States Postal Service Intelligent Mail Planning and Standards.

- **OneCode Solution™ RIBBS Intelligent Mail® Barcode Resource Download Site**
  www.ribbs.usps.gov/OneCodeSOLUTION


- **The Help Desk for Confirm Service**: 800-238-3150

- **The Help Desk for ACS**: 877-640-0724

- **The Help Desk for PostalOne!**: 800-522-9085

- **PostalOne! at**: [www.usps.com/postalone](http://www.usps.com/postalone)

- **The Mailpiece Design Analyst Lookup Tool** for non-Confirm or ACS IM barcode usage:

- **Melissa Data Postal Pickups** - [http://www.melissadata.com/postal/postal-links.htm](http://www.melissadata.com/postal/postal-links.htm)

- **Mailing & Fulfillment Services Association (MFSA)**


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The Intelligent Mail Barcode: Key to the USPS' Future

By Gene Del Polito

The following is a contribution from postal commentator Gene Del Polito for OutputLinks. The comments are solely the author's, and the responsible expression of opposing points of view is welcomed. Del Polito also serves as the President of the Association for Postal Commerce (http://postcom.org).

A key provision imposed by Congress within the Postal Accountability and Enhancement Act of 2006 was the requirement that the U.S. Postal Service (USPS) monitor and report on the timeliness and quality of mail services over which it exercised dominant market control. This was a requirement postal officials had expected, and, fortunately, they had spent considerable time contemplating how this could be accomplished. It was clear that the USPS needed a cost-efficient way for gathering information on the intake, processing, and delivery of mail. The mechanism the USPS has chosen is a four-state iteration (the Intelligent Mail Barcode, or IMB) of the two-state Postnet and Planet bar codes that are used today.

As far as mailers are concerned, the four-state IMB is vastly preferable to the two-dimensional PDF417 barcode that once had been under USPS consideration. The high-speed production of a readable PDF code presented a formidable technical challenge, and would have required substantial capital investment to devise the kind of equipment that would have been required.

The Postal Service itself felt that the IMB could serve as the backbone to a whole new information system that could be used to monitor and improve internal operations as well as provide mailers with the kind of timely, readily available, and transparent service performance data that it had long requested. Consequently, the USPS mapped out a strategy for deploying IMB-based technology and for enlisting mailer support to produce IMBs that could be used on mail pieces, mail sack tags, and pallet placards. Just recently, it took the first official steps toward implementing that strategy with the publication of a Federal Register notice of its intent to issue a proposed rule governing the role and use of the IMB with automation-rated mail.

In that notice, the USPS made clear that it intended to have the IMB serve in lieu of the Postnet and Planet barcodes that had been used in the past. The IMB would provide the framework for all USPS mail monitoring and service performance functions, as well as serve as a key plank in the platform upon which all future mail processing and distribution would be based.

This is probably the most important Postal Service undertaking since the development and implementation of the delivery point barcode. Getting this right is extremely important, particularly since in today's rapidly changing marketplace the USPS' margin for error is razor-thin. A full-scale implementation of the intelligent mail barcode represents a significant capital investment to both the Postal Service and its customers, and there still are many issues that need to be addressed before several IMB-based programs can be implemented.

For their part, mailers have many questions that they will need to have answered before they are willing to make the kind of commitment to IMB that the Postal Service so sorely needs. For instance, those who have tried to reproduce readable IMBs and full production speed have reported that the specs the USPS has proposed for this barcode are particularly tight, especially for flat mail. For many mailers, reproducing a production-based IMB may be impossible using today's most commonly used printing and addressing technologies.

Producing the IMB on all mail pieces, sack tags, tray labels, and pallet placards represents a significant new cost to mailers. Recognizing mailer worksharing with rates that fully reflect the production and processing costs the USPS can avoid is a long-standing American postal tradition. Mailers want to know how these cost-avoidances are likely to be reflected in postal rates. Mailers also are eager to learn whether they will be the beneficiaries of new information-related services based on the full-scale implementation of IMB. The last thing the mailing community...
expects to see is that their investment and participation in IMB programs adds little to making mail the kind of compelling proposition that merits continued business investment in mail as a medium for communication and commerce.

The Postal Service has just completed its first round inquiry with business mailers regarding some of the USPS' preliminary ideas on how IMB can be made a fixture in future mail preparation, processing, and delivery. It got an earful of mailer concerns, and, to its credit, the USPS has recognized the need to adopt a more deliberate pace in pursuit of its IMB goals.

The Postmaster General himself has published an open letter to all business customers regarding the many implementation concerns that need to be addressed. At his direction, the planned implementation of the IMB program has been pushed back several months to May 2009, and he has promised to continue to recognize through May 2010 the cost savings the Postal Service appreciates from mailer-applied postnet codes--a step that is sure to be greeted with a sign of relief from those who have said they needed more time to work through their own production transitions to the IMB.

Despite the challenges that still remain, a full-scale use of intelligent mail barcodes in lieu of today's postnet and planet codes is vital to the development needed for monitoring and improving the quality of mail service. Likewise, mailers stand to gain greatly not only from improved mail service but also from a greater degree of operational transparency that could greatly enhance mail's value as a business transactional tool.