

NEW SERVICES FOR MAIL DELIVERY

MailEbox: a new model of integration between paper and digital communications

It is said that history repeats itself. In the early 1950s technology enabled nearly every home (at least in the USA) to have a television. Fifteen years later it was the most popular form of communication. At the time it was also pronounced that radio would soon become obsolete. Sixty years later it is evident that video did not kill the radio star.

Of course this is not a general rule; some technologies can be made completely obsolete by others. Such is the case with the magnetic tapes and floppy disks used for computer data storage, which have been completely supplanted by new technologies.

From a general point of view all these examples show that the emerging media do not necessarily destroy the old ones, but force them to change, explore new areas and consequently improve.

Just as it was for radio in the early years of television, in the age of instant digital communication the rapid eclipse of traditional mail might seem inevitable. But it is much less obvious than one might think. Traditional mail is not made redundant by its electronic substitutes. According to a survey conducted in 2009 by Harris Interactive on behalf of Earthtone, 64 percent of American workers prefer printed media because they are easier to read than

digital versions. So the impact of internet-related communications on traditional mail could be statistically less important than we imagine, and in some cases it could even increase the paper-based flow.

For example online retailers increasingly use mailed paper catalogues to steer people to their sites. This indicates that there is a future for paper-based communications, but it will depend greatly on how postal services are able to change and improve. Of course digital media have important benefits, such as being able to be efficiently searched, archived and shared over distance. Moreover they can include dynamic and interactive content such as data, audio and video. At the same time, paper has advantages over digital technologies. In the case of direct marketing mail, an envelope can distinguish itself from others by its size and appearance much more easily than a direct marketing digital message.

So instead of adopting a conservative position towards the new media, postal services' strategy should focus on finding a new model of integration between paper and digital communications, combining the advantages and the features of both media.

A practical example of such integration is a new product developed by Solystic – the MailEbox. MailEbox has been designed to offer new services to postal customers,

bringing together the benefits of paper mail and electronic communications. This web-based application enables users (both senders and receivers) to visualise the flow of mail being delivered, exactly in the same way as an email client application shows and processes messages (received or sent).

From anywhere, via the web interface, the user can also act on any items. For example managing alternative delivery addresses, redirecting one or more mail items when moving home, whether temporarily or permanently, and choosing the best day and time for delivery.

MailEbox also gives even greater possibilities for integration between digital and paper media. Users can visualise the image of the envelope and decide if a piece of mail should be physically delivered or not. They can also select which items of mail the postal operator is authorised to open, scan and make available (via email) or archive as a digital file. This feature, made possible by MailEbox, has a positive benefit for postal operators as it provides flexibility to respond to the various customer's and recipient's needs.

For a direct marketing mail sender, MailEbox can provide immediate and accurate feedback on its marketing campaign. This can be very effective for focusing marketing strategies and for dealing with target customers more directly.

Focused on the integration of different media (paper based and digital), Solystic MailEbox is a good example of how it is possible to combine the benefits of traditional mail and information technology. Following such an approach, as video did not kill radio stars, digital communications will not kill postal services – far from it.



Left: MailEbox enables users to visualise the flow of physical mail via the web
Right: Managing alternative delivery addresses



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