

Transcript for Your Postal Podcast, 16th Edition

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Welcome to Your Postal Podcast. This is Richard Watkins from the office of Corporate Communications. In this edition, we'll talk with the Postal Service's president of Mailing and Shipping Services, Bob Bernstock about some upcoming retail innovations, and then we'll talk with the Postal Service's official historian, Meg Ausman, to see if history can provide a glimpse into the future.

Greeting cards and the Post Office have enjoyed a long history together. You might say they're as American as baseball and apple pie. Brian Sperry tells us how the Postal Service is taking that relationship to a whole new level.

(Bob Bernstock Segment)

Brian Sperry: I recently spoke with Bob Bernstock, USPS President of Mailing and Shipping Services. He shared with me some of the steps being taken to move the Postal Service into the 21st Century, including multi-channel integration, which will deliver a seamless service and shopping experience for customers. Our conversation started, however, with a question about a new test product that is scheduled to hit hundreds of postal retail lobbies in October.

Bob, thanks for joining Your Postal Podcast. I understand the Postal Service will soon offer greeting cards at some of its locations, what can you tell us about it?

Bob Bernstock: As you and your listeners probably already know, the Postal Service has 34,000 locations. We're the largest retailer in the world with about 9 million visitors a day. So we're always looking to get products in our lobbies that expand the value we can provide our customers. And our sales right now are remarkably low. On the consumers products it's only about \$20 dollars per retail location per day. So we looked at where we could make the biggest difference, and greeting cards came to the top of the list, and within the law we're allowed to sell greeting cards. And we will be offering them on a test basis starting in our 500 largest Post Offices, and then we'll expand to about 1,500, and then keep going based on the level of success, and we'll average about 80 cards per store.

Sperry: What other retail innovations are on the horizon?

Bernstock: Well one is, and I think it's huge, and one of the largest initiatives in the country, is we're going to have a multi-channel integration, which means our consumers will have a choice to buy postage products and services the way that's most convenient, either at retail through our website, or actually on the call center. We're building a common data architecture, IT architecture, so that essentially everything will look the same to our customers. And we'll also improve some of our other complex transactions like passport processing over time. So we're really moving into the 21st Century in a very, very aggressive way, and we've got a little bit of catching up to do, and then when we catch up we want to stay out in front of the competition.

Sperry: What can employees do to help increase retail revenue?

Bernstock: My experience is that the single most important thing our partners, our employees, can do is provide consistently excellent customer service. Research has shown that it is the single biggest factor in determining where people shop, including where they ship. The more satisfied our customers are the more likely they are to come back and stick with us for the long term. I would just focus on that. Excellent customer service leads to excellent results.

Sperry: Would you please give us an update on the Summer Sale and the upcoming Fall Sale?

Bernstock: Well Brian, as you may know, this is the first time that we've had a sale like this in our 230 year history, so we're delighted to be in the business of offering incentives for incremental volume. And also today the Fall Sale was approved by the Postal Regulatory Commission (PRC) so that is going to be a reality. The preliminary results suggest that customers representing over 60 percent of the eligible volume have participated, and we're seeing tremendous number of testimonials from our customers, and we believe that hundreds of millions of incremental pieces of mail are going to come into the mail stream, and we think that the First Class mail incentive, or Fall Sale program is going to attract the First-Class Mailers in addition to the Summer Sale, which was focused on the Standard mailers. So we're expanding the program, we're thrilled with the results. We see hundreds of millions of incremental pieces of mail coming into the mail stream, and we think strategically it's a long term way to keep mail volume strong.

Sperry: Is there anything you'd like to add?

Bernstock: I want to tell you and all the listeners how much we all appreciate the work that's being done on a daily basis to maintain our reputation as the most trusted government agency in the country, and continue to provide the superior service that we already do.

(Postal Historian Segment)

Watkins: There's an old saying that suggests history can be our guide. And during these troubled times for the Postal Service, what better person to ask if that's true than the official postal historian, Meg Ausman.

Meg Ausman is a 31-year Postal Service veteran, and since 1991 has served as the official postal historian. Meg, thanks for joining Your Postal Podcast. What are some of the highlights of your career as historian?

Meg Ausman: Well, I've had the pleasure of seeing experiments we've made, going to the Engineering Center and seeing the work we've done there. Obviously, everyone's seen the growth of automation; seeing what we're doing at Postal Headquarters with the POS program and, of course, how that was implemented in the field. That's helped revolutionize postal operations. I was here for the Elvis stamp -- that was a lot of fun when Tony Frank suggested the idea of having people vote on that. And just the excitement and fun surrounding that. It's just been great being here and seeing everything that's going on.

Watkins: What are some of the requests that you and your staff receive from Postal Service employees and the general public?

Ausman: One question that really stumped not only me but the director of the Postal Museum at the time and the British post historian came from a 10-year-old girl, and she wanted to know why stamps were in the upper right-hand corner of envelopes. There's nothing in the regulations on that, and we checked back, and checked records, and we came up with a hypothesis that it's because most people are right-handed. And when stamps were first used in England in the 1840s, the clerks would fan the mail with their left hand and then stamp it with their right hand, and it was just easier to put the postage right there. But again, that's an educated guess -- but that little girl stumped a lot of people.

Watkins: Can the Postal Service's proud history tell us anything of the organization's future, especially given our current economic conditions?

Ausman: What's pretty consistent in our history -- and I think that is something you can look at -- is we are a very adaptable organization. You can see changes all along the line. And in the early 1800s, even back to there, I've noticed high-level people would start talking about ideas, and there seemed to be about a 30-year time to develop them. And I'm talking of the early 1800s. And then that time frame became shorter as you moved into the early 1900s. Now, of course, we're dealing with very rapid change and adaptation. But I think that's our great strength. I also -- as I look at our history, and you read about individuals -- I think one of the great models we are in the Postal Service is one of working together.

And I know in history -- certainly movies -- I think it's wonderful; wonderful stories about the lone individual who goes out and stands up against all odds. We're a little different story in the Postal Service. Here, we're a real union of people around the country that work together. And I think of it as a chain. Yes, I'm drawing on Washington's statement, you know "A chain that will not bind us, but a chain that will never be broken." But we are a chain that links people. And each person in the chain, whether it's transportation, or the clerk, or the carrier, or the mail handler, the driver, is very important to the mission. So, what I see is an actually, really an inspiring history we have in our organization, and I think that strength will help us a great deal.

Watkins: Thank you for listening to Your Postal Podcast. Now, we'd like to hear from you. Send your story ideas and feedback to yourpostalpodcast@usps.com. A production of Western Area Corporate Communications. Copyright 2009, all rights reserved.