



MOVING MOUNTAINS IN GOVERNMENT

The State of Colorado becomes the first NCOA vendor for all of Colorado government

By Mike W. Sexson

Undeliverable As Addressed (UAA) mail has always been accepted as a loss that comes with large bulk mailings. But since we are so used to UAA mail being part of our day-to-day mail, we have never noticed the seriousness of the problem and the costs that are associated to it.

Governments always budget for UAA mail because of it being a casualty of bulk mail and something that was always accepted. However, the way our economy is right now is a wake-up call; if we are going to have any improvement in the government, we need make changes on how we do day-to-day business from the way we do things now. We civil servants now have to face the truth and ask ourselves: Are we making decisions that are best for us and our organizations, or are we making decisions that are best for our constituents?

NCOA and Address Cleansing

A group of State employees and a team from USPS worked together and decided that UAA mail was a problem that could be controlled by making organizations accountable on how they process their mail. Integrated Document Solutions (IDS) — which is within the Department of Personnel & Administration, Division of Central services and includes the State of Colorado's mail house — invited other State Departments that had large mailings and discussed the problem about UAA mail and the direction USPS was going with making all organizations more accountable with how they process mail.

The group asked, "What would it take to create a centralized database that can be used by all government agencies in a State to send data to so that it could be cleansed?" The first answer that came back on that question was: "It would be as the same as trying to move a mountain by yourself!"

In a partnership with the USPS over the last three years, Colorado's is the first State government in the nation to decipher a complex mailing process in order to adopt a new National Change of Address (NCOA) database certification for all its State agency mailings. "Address cleansing," as the process is called, of its citizen and business databases was a collaborative effort between State employees and the USPS officials to find a more efficient way to reduce UAA mailings.

Patrick Reynolds, Bryan Cowser and Toby Rampa of the U.S. Postal Service Sales team worked with Sherri Fuss, Dan Zamora and myself of the State mail operations team on the NCOA certification, which is the formal name for the address cleansing project. "The State is not only saving significantly on their postage costs but also their printing, mailing labor costs, on thousands of unnecessary re-mailings," remarks Reynolds. "The average mailing list of any organization at any given time has between 12-20% error rates due to addresses simply being out-of-date."

Weighing the Costs

The letters that are labeled UAA not only use postage, but the USPS can charge a fee of up to \$0.007 for each piece of mail to recoup some of its labor losses from dealing with undeliverable mail. The State annually sends out more than 18 million pieces of mail, of which approximately 12%, or 1.9 million pieces, are undeliverable. Not only would we see an increase in postage fees, the \$1.5 million in postage discounts that the State of Colorado is getting from presorting mail could be taken away if they do not have an address quality program in place.

Adds Toby Rampa, "The Postal Service is also benefitting because of the reduced time and costs it requires to re-handle and forward the Undeliverable As Addressed mail. What the State of Colorado is doing is what we'd like every state or major mailing organization nationwide to do with NCOA certification."

"Address cleansing not only could save taxpayers millions of dollars, but it also addresses greening initiatives by saving millions of pieces of unusable mail from going into recycling," says Colorado Governor Bill Ritter. "To have Colorado's mailing operations be the first state in the nation to earn this mailing certification is a testament to the dedicated efforts of State employees, who make a difference in the efficiency of our government."

"Address cleansing solves a huge problem that plagues all businesses," says Mike Lincoln, Manager of IDS. "Now that we've invested in this new process in both technology and experience to make mailing more efficient, we are getting requests from other local municipalities and even other state governments to help them adopt this new technology, too."

The Best We Can Do?

The hardest thing we had to do before we were able to get this program up and running was being honest with ourselves and asking, "Are we doing the best we possibly can, or can we do better?"

When putting this program together, we worked with different government agencies in understanding what different types of mail they have and what is required by law for them to send out that mail. This feedback gave us the foundation on how we would set up the NCOA program. The biggest concern was that most of the agencies still do not have an understanding of what NCOA is and how UAA mail is affecting them. The agencies that have presorted discounts are already very educated; the ones that don't have enough mail to be presorted are the ones in the dark.

It was after this information was gathered that it was realized that in order for this program to be successful, we have to work on education as well, not just providing a service. We are now working on education programs for different state agencies, municipalities and counties on how UAA mail affects them and how to best utilize NCOA so that it benefits them the most.

The Results

So far, the project has been way more successful than ever expected; not only are we seeing results in savings on each mailing that goes through the program, we are seeing individuals that didn't understand or felt overwhelmed in dealing with postage problems now saying they feel like a ton of pressure has been lifted off of them.

This program works, but it won't work if you merely duplicate what the team from State of Colorado did. The success of the program depends completely on you, the individual. Ask yourself these questions: Am I willing to be honest with myself? And am I willing to do more than what my day-to-day job is in order to make a difference?

Only you alone can make the decisions, but all of you can make a difference! ■

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