

BUYING TIPS: POSTAGE METERS

When was the last time you upgraded your postage meter?

If you haven't done it for some time, now's the time to start thinking about an upgrade. Decertification is just around the corner, which means businesses must replace their old analog machines with digital systems that are compliant with the U.S. Postal Service's Information-Based Indicia Program (IBIP). (See the sidebar for additional information about the advantages of digital postage meters.)

The following eight tips can help you make a wise buying decision as you look to upgrade your current postage meter or acquire your first system.

Take into account your unique office applications.

When purchasing a mail machine, it's important to take into account the specific needs of your day-to-day mailing applications. For instance, do you need to seal your envelopes? Does your office manage multiple departments or multiple users? Does it conduct special marketing campaigns or send out a large number of invoices and bills every month? How much mail are you sending a month? Are you mostly sending packages or envelopes? Do you have peak mailing periods? How often?

Address problems with your current mailing solution. It's important to convey what problems

you're having with your current mailing system to the sales representative. The sales rep will then be able to offer new and improved solutions and ensure that these issues are resolved with your new mailing machine.

Maintain a rapport with your sales rep.

Be sure to keep all documentation and contact information. Should a problem arise, keeping this information will ensure the problem can be addressed immediately and effectively.

Consider the relationship with your vendor.

No matter what company you acquire a mailing system from, it's critical that you get to know that company and build a relationship with it. Be sure to take the time to not only ask the sales rep for several referrals, but to ask detailed questions about the company and its products. Ask the rep about the company's service philosophy, its commitment to responding to your questions and phone calls, and how it's assisted other customers. This will help you determine whether the company is interested in your specific needs and not just in making a sale. Keep in mind that although you're about to invest in a product, you also want your supplier to be involved and concerned about your investment as well.

The previous tips are courtesy of Dinasha Ariathurai, product marketing manager, mailing systems, Neopost.

Look for a system that will grow with you.

As your mail center's demands and production grow, you'll need a mail system that can grow right along with them. Therefore, be sure to look at the various system options that are available. Do these solutions allow you to keep up with your demand, while not adding additional work? Can options be purchased at any time, or do you have to guess what your future needs will be and add the options today? Seek a solution that allows you to grow beyond your current demands or as your budget allows.

Make sure it's an efficient solution.

Select a mailing system that offers several methods to meet your mail center's demands for processing mixed-weight mail. This saves time and money. For example, with an optional dynamic scale, as mixed-weight mail is processed, items are measured for envelope length, width, thickness, and weight to ensure the correct postage is applied to every envelope. With an integrated weighing platform and differential weighing feature, stacks of items too thick to run through the system are placed on the weighing platform, and as items are removed, the correct weight and postage amount are calculated. These items can then be either run through the system or a tape is automatically dispensed. With this type of mailing system, technology works for you, decreasing your time spent running

mail and ensuring that your mail is accurately and efficiently processed.

Look for accounting capabilities. More and more companies are recognizing that mailrooms not only must keep track of their postage costs, but they need to keep track of the costs for each individual department as well. A truly effective mailing system should be able to track the costs for each department and either print or download the reports. If you

need to charge back departments and are looking to move from simply a mail center to a profit center, then be sure your mailing system has the option of interfacing with an external PC accounting system. With an external PC accounting system, you can keep track of your costs and charge-backs and even do rate comparisons for various carriers.

Consider ease of use. Don't overlook the fact that the mailing

system you select should be easy to use. For example, is it simple to operate with an easy-to-use mailing machine interface (MMI)? Is it intuitive? Does the mail need to be presorted or separated for various reasons due the mailing system limits? Look for a mailing system that gives you a true mailing solution. **S**

The previous tips are courtesy of Michael Keenan, director of product marketing, mailing systems, Hasler Inc.

GOING DIGITAL MEANS GREATER SECURITY AND PRODUCTIVITY

by Mike Doumas, CEO, FP Mailing Solutions

Within the next decade, all businesses will transition their mail centers to digital postage meters, which will speed mail processing and significantly enhance productivity of mail center operations. The new digital meters offer full compliance with the U.S. Postal Service's (USPS') Information-Based Indicia Program (IBIP)—the highest level of security proposed by the USPS to date. In addition, the new digital meters will offer integrated software and security that protect postal funds and enable process improvements.

PKI protects postal funds

The new digital meters are backed by the latest security technology. Working within the parameters set by the USPS, postage meter manufacturers have invested millions in the latest encryption technology, communications software, and security features to handle the private key and public key infrastructure (PKI) aspects of the new digital meters.

PKIs provide the highest level of security for Internet transactions, verifying a business's identity using a unique numeric, time-stamped certifi-

cate. Public key cryptography is used to scramble the transaction before it's transmitted and then to decode that transmission once it's received.

With this level of automation, the new IBI-compatible meters support the USPS' Intelligent Mail objectives. The flexibility of the technology also provides long-term adaptability. In fact, the USPS expects the digital printing meters to be on the market for many years—as long as there are no security risks identified.

Smart card technology

Advanced meter hardware and software tools also provide flexibility over internal mail center operations. Mail center managers now have the opportunity to re-strategize and fine-tune their mailing operations to better meet the needs of the organization.

For example, the latest digital postage meters with their integrated software components are able to efficiently handle addressing, sorting, presorting, folding, and inserting any document in one seamless process. This can reduce the use of outside services for mass mailings—and the chance that corporate proprietary information

(customer data, prospect mailing lists, billing details) may fall into the wrong hands.

Digital meters help create a more "knowledge-based" mail center that safely and efficiently handles a company's needs. This may include all paper-based information—from customer invoices to incoming and outgoing packages, and from interoffice communications to marketing campaigns and beyond. In addition, the built-in scalability of the new digital meters means that mail-handling operations can actually expand, taking on the large, complex mailings that were previously outsourced to mail houses.

The latest digital meters also provide intelligence through printable standard reports that give mail center managers the information they need to plan more proactively. The reports can also be used to provide statistics to company executives and as a feedback source to help employees advance.

For any small to midsize business, going digital brings a host of advantages, from increased protection of postal funds to greater flexibility within the mail center operation.