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## BUYING TIPS: MAILING SYSTEMS

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You can't overestimate the importance of mail in the office. No matter how much you hear about e-mail's impact on business communication, traditional mail services remain a critical day-to-day function. Key to that function is having the right equipment in place. With that in mind, we contacted four of the leading mailing systems vendors (Neopost and Hasler, Pitney Bowes, and FP Mailing Solutions) and asked them to share with us tips for making the right equipment purchase. (Editor's note: FP Mailing Solutions never responded to our request for information. Neopost and Hasler buying tips were provided by a Neopost/Hasler dealer.)

According to Nick Kellen, director of sales, Claritus Inc., a Neopost USA/Hasler dealer based in Lincoln, Neb., purchasing mailing equipment is like buying an automobile. "Do your homework, visit more than one dealership, test drive various models, and ask for references before buying," he says. "What you are looking for is a dealership that is easy to work with, can show you every model, is fairly priced, and has multiple positive references. It is sad how

many mailers never take the time to 'test drive' a postage machine or any other piece of equipment or software prior to purchase. A good and reliable sales representative will require you to test drive the products and will live with what you purchase as much as you do."

Kellen's other tips include:

**Participate in the equipment/software demonstration process.** If not, look elsewhere. Bring in multiple samples of the types of mail you process. Using both dealer-supplied samples and those you brought, spend at least 30 minutes operating the machines. If you aren't the person that will be running the equipment, bring along the person who will be to see the equipment also. He might have different questions than a person making the buying decision.

**Be prepared to share all of your processing information, such as the types of mail you process, the rates you use, how often you process mail, any special projects that you process, along with any**

**reports that you need to generate as well as permits.** A respectable dealership will ask you many questions prior to a demonstration and before making a proposal. If you're not sharing and they're not asking, you could be headed for disaster.

**Look at the five-year cost of a product and not just the monthly payment.** You need to factor in supplies, reset fees, types of service, administrative fees, and end-of-lease terms. Very often, the machine with the lowest payment has some hidden costs and may run you twice as much in the long run.

**Remember that after-sale customer service is as important as the actual buying process.** Don't be afraid to visit the local equipment dealership. Speak with the service manager, and ask to talk with the receptionist who will be answering your calls. Even telephone the dealership to see how you're treated. Get a general idea of what the dealership's customer service will be like after the sale.

**Ask for a few references of customers**

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-NICK KELLEN, DIRECTOR OF SALES, CLARITUS INC.

**that have had problems.** The only way to find out the quality of after-sales support is to talk with someone who has had a problem. Most vendors can take care of customers that never have issues.

Karen D'Andrea, director of product marketing, U.S. Mailing for Pitney Bowes Inc., encourages buyers to ask mailing systems vendors five key questions:

**1. How can I access software upgrades and U.S. Postal Service ((USPS) postage rate changes for my meter or mailing system?**

Make sure that the vendor is equipped to deal with software upgrades and USPS postage rate changes in an effective and efficient manner. The right mailing system should offer a quick and easy solution to obtain postage funds, update the system with new postal rates, implement new software features, and more. With the right technology, software upgrades and postage price changes shouldn't require service installation or interrupt operations. Some vendors also offer customers the ability to connect to their vendor's server through their local area connection for access to these services, eliminating the need for connection through analog lines and increasing the efficiency of the mailstream operation.

**2. What types of postal payment options do you offer?**

Ordering and paying for postage should be a simple process for mailers. Find out about prepaying or financing options for both meter and permit postage. Ask about the flexibility of paying over time and if there's a cost associated with it. In addition, ask if the vendor offers a line of credit that can be used to purchase all of

your mailstream-related expenses and whether the company offers you postage discounts for prepaid balances as well as rewards that can be redeemed for free postage or supplies. Some vendors also offer unlimited transactions with no transaction fees and consolidated billing with postage, supplies, and carrier expenses billed to one account.

**3. Are there solutions that your meter or mailing system offers that can help me track and manage my postal expenditures and generate reports?**

Check with the vendor to see if it offers software or other online solutions that can be used with the meter or mailing system to help track, manage, and report on postage expenses. Solutions can vary from managing pieces and postage on the meter to consolidating enterprise reporting on a PC or online. Also, ask the vendor if it offers solutions that can track mailpieces after they're processed with the meter or mailing system. To help manage and track expenses beyond meter mail, inquire if the vendor has solutions for permit mail, presort services, and meters from any vendor. Finally, determine whether the vendor can aggregate information across multiple accounts and provide you with transparency on all of your organization's postage expenditures. Solutions such as these can help increase efficiency and give you greater visibility into your mailing costs.

**4. Does the meter or mailing system include access to USPS Special Services like E-Certified Mail, Delivery Confirmation, and Signature Confirmation?**

Access to these services can help mailers ensure their mail is arriving at its

destination and to the right individual. Some vendors have the capability to enable electronic services from the USPS using a mailing system's control center and provide access to delivery information online. Mailers can also benefit from discounts on postage for qualifying mail sent using electronic services versus retail services.

**5. What level of support can I expect from my mailing vendor?**

Multitier service level agreements provide several options of support for mailers. With these agreements, mailers can choose the level of support they need, including options for response time and training. A national service desk with a toll-free number guarantees staffing for technical questions, and a certified national network of service technicians means on-site support if needed. Online account access also provides a one-stop resource to get answers fast or troubleshoot problems.

In addition, D'Andrea adds that no one should be more knowledgeable about the mailstream than your mailing vendor. "The vendor should offer seminars and Webinars for money-saving insights that can be customized for your needs," she says. "The vendor should also keep you up-to-date with news that impacts the mailing industry and your mailroom."

Lastly, she says the vendor can also help streamline your mailroom operations by keeping you stocked with supplies and offering the option to finance your purchases—from ink and toner, envelopes and paper, to shipping materials and office products. 