

Data Quality and Variable Data Printing for Print Service Providers

Brought to you by The Association for PRINT Technologies (APTech):

[Mike Porter](#), President, Print/Mail Consultants, and author of this VDP 101 article, will be moderating a panel of industry suppliers and practitioners in a session titled, “Variable Print & Mail: The Software Required to Do the Job,” at the [APTech Variable Data Print & Mail Summit](#) to be held Wednesday, April 14 from 10am–3pm.

When we think about variable data related to print and mail applications, we often focus on the postal address. Obviously, current deliverable addresses are critical factors in determining the success of any communication delivered via the mail. Any mailpiece you create that the US Postal Service cannot deliver to the intended recipient because of a bad address is a waste of time, resources, and postage.

Besides addresses, other variable data used to personalize the content or control variables like offers, images, or language are also important. In this article, we’ll cover tools and techniques print service providers can use to improve data quality and some ways to enhance the data so direct mail campaigns produce better results.

Who is Responsible?

I’ve had discussions with print service providers about the quality of data they receive from their clients. Some argue they are not responsible for correcting the information. Their job is to print with the supplied data, and they are hesitant to suggest to their clients that they should change anything. I totally understand this point of view, and I agree. It is not the *responsibility* of print service providers to correct their client’s data, *but often it is in their best interest*.

A client that invests in mailed communications is making a commitment. The printer may convince clients that mail is effective, but marketers are also keenly aware that mail costs a lot more to produce than messages delivered via the digital channels also available to them. A client’s decision to run future direct mail campaigns relies heavily on the performance of past efforts. Print providers should do all in their power to make sure each campaign results in a positive return on investment (ROI). A print/mail service provider that doesn’t take extra steps to ensure accurate and timely delivery of all the mailpieces they produce is leaving a portion of that ROI up to chance. They may lose opportunities to run future campaigns and miss the chance to collect valuable testimonials, use case data, and referrals.

I always advise print/mail service providers to confirm the deliverability of addresses from client-supplied mailing lists. Outdated or incomplete data drives up the cost of campaigns and works against a favorable campaign ROI. Show clients how their project results can improve by correcting addresses, removing duplicates, or filtering non-targeted names from the list. Most clients will realize it costs less to pay for the data quality processes than the money they would spend to print and mail items certain to be a total waste.

What Steps to Take

A party, such as a print/mail service provider, can verify postal addresses and correct the data before mailing, even though they do not own the data. This is a rare circumstance. Most data cannot be independently verified. A print service provider cannot ensure an account number in the client’s data is correct or confirm that client-supplied customer purchase history is complete. But they can evaluate and

correct postal addresses using USPS-approved software, methods, and databases. The service provider can do this work on their own, without involving the client. They can identify problems and correct deficiencies.

Once addresses are cleaned and verified, print/mail service providers can take more actions to improve conversion rates. They can narrow the target list or add details that aid in personalization or multi-channel communication.

Address Standardization

The first tool for ensuring address quality is one that standardizes address formats, assigns ZIP+4 codes, and performs a basic check for reasonability. Commonly labeled as Coding Accuracy Support System (CASS) software, the US Postal Service certifies these programs. They are available from several vendors as cloud services, API calls, or on-premise software.

CASS processing does two major things for a mailing list. First, it puts all the addresses into a standard, approved format, which enables later processes like move updates, merge/purge, or suppression lists to execute efficiently. Second, CASS processing identifies deficient data records. If the software cannot assign a ZIP+4 code, something is wrong with the address. The software will report the problem, usually with a set of return codes. Errors might include a missing element such as street directional, or references to streets that do not exist within the ZIP code specified in the data.

Print/mail service providers should understand that CASS processing on its own does not guarantee deliverability. House numbers, for example, are verified only by a range. An address that passes through CASS may carry a house number within the range of house numbers defined for the street. The address might receive a ZIP+4 code, but the address could correspond to a vacant lot or a non-existent property.

Move Updates

Besides ensuring that addresses in the mailing file are accurate, organizations want to make sure the Postal Service delivers their mail to the intended recipients. Mail delivered to the wrong person at a valid address probably won't generate the intended response.

To avoid such errors, print/mail service providers should compare their client's mailing lists to the National Change of Address (NCOA) database maintained by the US Postal Service. NCOA processing will update the addresses of individuals, families, or businesses that have moved and filed a change of address notice with the USPS.

Besides improving the success of a mailing campaign, NCOA processing saves money on postage. The US Postal Service spends hundreds of millions of dollars every year handling undeliverable as addressed (UAA) mail. To encourage mailers to submit mail with current addresses, the USPS requires mailers to update their mailing files using an approved move update process within 95 days of the mailing. Failure to do so disqualifies mailers from substantial postage discounts.

Not everyone who moves files a change of address notice with the US Postal Service. Though not required to qualify for postage discounts, some mailers take an extra step and find movers by using commercial databases. A Private Change of Address (PCOA) service includes data from sources such as credit card companies and magazine publishers that may receive address change notifications not reported to the USPS.

Deliverability

I mentioned that CASS processing alone does not always guarantee deliverability. That requires a finer analysis, called Delivery Point Validation (DPV). Some CASS processing vendors include DPV, others do not. Sometimes, DPV is available only for an additional charge.

DPV will tell a mailer if an address actually exists. If the building has been vacant for 90 days or more, has been demolished, or is yet to be built, the DPV file will include this information. This data allows print/mail service providers to strike the data from the client's mailing file, eliminating the expense to create and distribute UAA mail.

Duplicates and Filters

Two or more identical mailpieces sent to the same person on the same day will not increase the response rate. Finding and removing duplicates is a simple way to prevent this wasteful practice. Keep in mind that defining a duplicate may differ, depending on the application. On some projects, removing data records based only on the delivery address may be in order. In other cases, clients may want to send to the same address, but not to the same person, so print/mail service providers would match data on name and address.

The sophistication of the matching/consolidation tool makes a difference. Basic programs like Excel will only find exact duplicates, but more advanced software will take nicknames or common misspellings into account. Bob Smith, Robert Smith, and Robt Smith could all be the same person if they all live at the same address. Some software would not count them as duplicates.

Use filters to eliminate data records from the mailing if they are not in the target group. A roofing company might consider individuals living in a certain ZIP code as prospects for a promotional offer, for example. But a wise print/mail professional will recommend dropping any addresses that include an apartment number. Apartment renters are unlikely buyers of new roofs. Mailers often filter deceased or incarcerated individuals from mailing lists, along with nursing home residents.

Presorting

Specialized software certified by the US Postal Service sorts data into mailing sequence, breaks the mail down into trays, pallets, or other containers, and generates tray tags and other identifying items necessary to submit a discounted, automated mailing. This software also creates the electronic files and reports necessary for such a mailing.

Presort software is available from many software vendors. Print/mail service providers often choose their software based on the volume of the work they handle. Some systems are aimed at modest volumes, while others are engineered to process high volumes of data at lightning speed.

Enhanced/Appended Data

Mailers can add useful data to their client's mailing lists to help them target their prospects more precisely or to modify offers, graphics, language, or other elements of a direct mail package. Some examples of appended data could be GPS coordinates, income level, age, or sex.

Print service providers may also suggest their clients mount a multi-channel campaign. Appending email addresses or cell phone numbers to the postal address list allows the service provider to distribute messages to targeted prospects via email or text message besides the printed and mailed material. The

appended data enables more billable revenue for the service provider as they manage a multi-channel campaign for their clients while simultaneously encouraging statistically higher conversion rates.

Data enhancements might include constructing a proper salutation line for letters, converting data to upper and lower case, or spelling out abbreviations.

Making Mail Better

Direct mail can thrive by delivering personalized, relevant material to the right people at the right time. Most often, marketers will connect the printed material to complementary digital assets. A thorough understanding of data and the ability to put it to work to create direct mail pieces that get results is a key factor connected to growth and success for print/mail service providers.

As a former service provider, I understand the conflict that arises when data changes reduce the total volume of pieces comprising print and mail jobs. Revenue is often connected directly to the number of items printed and processed, so tactics like filtering or deduping will affect the billing.

When print was the only viable way of marketing a product or service, we didn't worry so much about the amount of waste associated with generating mail that was unlikely to reach a viable prospect. Today, clients have many alternatives, all of them less expensive than direct mail. If clients are not happy with the results of mailing campaigns, they will spend their money on digital marketing instead. Taking the initiative to help clients maximize the impact of their mailing projects by improving the quality of the data they use to produce them is a strategy that promotes client loyalty and repeat business.

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