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USPS RAISES BAR FOR SCANNING FLAT-SIZE MAIL

A new threshold for machine read barcodes on flat-size mail will be crossed on July 31. That's the date the United States Postal Service begins to require a 90 percent rate of readability of barcodes in order to qualify for lower rates. This read rate—increased from the current 80 percent—is evaluated by the Postal Service's MERLIN (Mailing Evaluation and Readability Lookup Instrument) system. Letter-sized mailing rates remain at 90 percent, the threshold set when MERLIN was deployed in 2001.

The Postal Service currently has 1,203 MERLIN systems in operation nationwide. Each system can verify First-Class, Standard and Periodical mail. It does so in a number of ways, including weighing and measuring mail pieces, evaluating metering data, and determining barcode readability and accuracy. "The MERLIN system is delivering the quality results we hoped for," said Michele Denny, Postal Service Manager of Marketing Technology and Channel Management. "More than 94 percent of flat mailings are passing at the current quality threshold."

Mailers who don't meet the new threshold—but who achieve the former standard of 80 percent—will pay proportionally higher postage based upon the readability score. "A mailing will only fail to get any automation discount if it falls below 80 percent readability," Denny said. This change will make the barcode quality threshold requirement and policy for flat mailings consistent with letter mailings, which has been at the 90 percent level since the implementation of MERLIN.

"The industry has responded favorably to MERLIN because we all agree that quality mailings improve the effectiveness and efficiency of the mail and the Postal Service," added Denny. "The industry shares our belief that quality matters."

The increase in the readability requirement will benefit businesses that use the mail, said Bob O'Brien, Vice President for Postal Affairs at Time Customer Service, Inc. and the Industry Chair of the Mailers' Technical Advisory Committee (MTAC). "Our industry relies on mail's effectiveness and efficiency to meet its business goals and those of its customers," said O'Brien. "That value promise can only be delivered if the mailing industry prepares and enters its mailings in accordance with the highest possible standards."

"Every evaluation results in a diagnostic that's shared with the mailer," said Denny, who cited results like reduced mailer/postal rework, lower Postal Service costs for processing and transportation, and improved delivery service emerging from the implementation of MERLIN and other mailing technologies.

More information about MERLIN can be found at www.usps.com/merlin.