Informed Visibility®
The USPS System for Tracking Letter and Flat Mail

By **Dave Lewis**
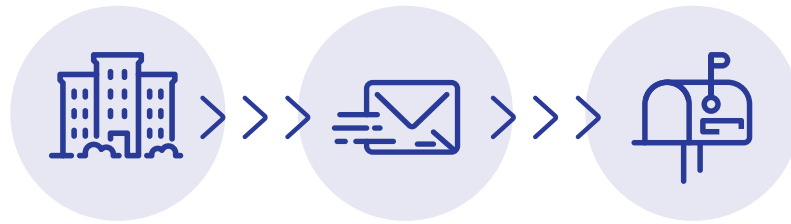
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The USPS System for Tracking Letter and Flat Mail

In this age, we wouldn't think of sending a package, or ordering merchandise, without tracking. Typically, all the packages sent out for delivery will ultimately arrive – and the vast majority of those will arrive on time, or worst case maybe a day late. In those rare cases where an item truly doesn't arrive, consumers can be confident that the retailer will replace the item free of charge. So, in a sense, there is no practical benefit, particularly to a consumer, for tracking packages. But there is an essential intangible benefit – peace of mind. When a consumer forsakes traveling to a retail outlet and picking up an item on their own, they have put their trust into an online retailer that they cannot see or touch. They need to be reassured that their package is on the way, and when it will arrive.

Successful fulfillment companies have taken this tracking to a whole new level. They communicate tracking information to customers almost as soon as an order is received, using email and often text messaging to let their customers know when an item has shipped, where it is in its travels, when it is out for delivery, and, of course, when it has been delivered. Through these messages they form a new, better relationship with the customer, and earn their customer's trust. It is hard to imagine an Amazon or Chewy even existing if they could not provide accurate and accessible tracking.

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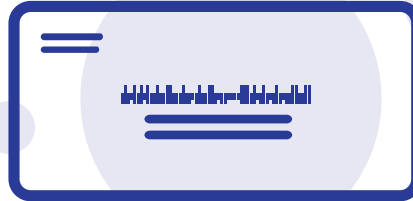
Letter and flat mail today can offer comparable tracking that is just as important as package tracking, although the customer is generally going to be different. A consumer may not be terribly interested that a nonprofit's April appeal is going to be delivered to their mailbox today – or that it is a week later than planned. But that nonprofit cares a great deal and needs to know when and where their mail is being delivered. Print and mail service providers want to develop that same relationship of trust that Amazon has with its customers. Mail tracking can provide that same piece-level information – when the mail was sent, where it is in its travels, and when it is delivered. Knowing this can bring organizations who rely on the mail that same peace of mind.

Of course, the mechanics of tracking mail are much different than tracking packages. If a letter carrier needed to take a photo of each piece of mail delivered successfully to a mailbox – well, we'd need a lot more letter carriers. And mail would be much, much more expensive. Package delivery can afford that kind of service because the shipping cost of a package is dramatically higher than a letter, so there is room in that price to provide that kind of personalized individual tracking.

> "Knowing where their mail is brings Peace of Mind to organizations who rely on the mail"

The US Postal Service, at the end of the last century, began to offer a tracking service that could provide that kind of information on the scale and cost needed for letters and flats. In 2017, that tracking was refined into today's mail tracking service – Informed Visibility® (IV). IV has many essential differences from package delivery but can offer the same result – peace of mind for the customer – the mailer – and a lot more.

Our objective here is to provide insight into how Informed Visibility® works and how mail owners and mail service providers can build it into their businesses.

Specifically, we will cover the following topics:
- Why we track mail
- Defining Informed Visibility (IV) – the basics
- Why you need a tracking partner, and can't access IV directly (or shouldn't)
- The nuts and bolts of Informed Visibility
  - o   IV scan types, and what they mean
  - o   What scan data IV provides, and what IV does not scan
- The business benefits of Informed Visibility
- Imaginative uses of Informed Visibility
  - o   Inbound tracking – tracking response
  - o   Triggering other marketing channels
  - o   Proof of mailing
  - o   Automated notices to customers
- SnailWorks' advanced mail tracking solutions

Given the substantial investment required to send mail, the relatively small cost of tracking is easily justified.

Why We Track Mail

Mail production is a process; the mail producer is generally accountable to the mail owner – their customer – to track mail production through their process: printing the mailing components, doing addressing and personalization, and submitting that mail to the Postal Service for delivery. For decades, providing proof of mailing was considered satisfactory for the completion of the project – it proved that the mail was in the Postal Service's hands.

Of course, the process isn't really done until that piece of mail is in the postal customers' hands. With that delivery data available, progressive mailers began providing tracking services as part of their standard service and more mail owners began to demand it. In addition to accountability, there is an extensive list of benefits associated with tracking mail:

- Timing of follow-up marketing efforts – knowing exactly when mail is delivered allows mail owners to boost response by reinforcing the mail with a subsequent effort – email, telemarketing, web display advertising – even another piece of mail.

- Anticipate and prepare for response – whether bringing in on-call inbound telemarketers or staffing retail locations, mail tracking allows companies to staff accordingly.

- Positioning of merchandise – knowing what mail is being delivered in what regions allows retailers to distribute high-value inventory to the correct locations at the optimum moment.

- Identify and resolve USPS delivery issues – mail tracking allows mailers to address delivery issues with the Postal Service while the mail is still in the mail stream.

- Track responses sent through the mail – know when donations and payments are in the mail.

- Document that mail was sent – mail tracking allows mail service providers to document that mail has been received by the Postal Service and can serve as due diligence for mailers requiring proof of mailing for statutory and liability reasons.

SNAILWORKS™

Defining Informed Visibility®

Informed Visibility® is the system the Postal Service uses to gather information on where mail is and what is happening to it. As mail pieces travel through postal sorting equipment, those machines read the Intelligent Mail barcode (IMb) on the mail pieces and distribute that data to enrolled subscribers. In many cases, the system can draw inferences based on where pallets, trays, and bundles are. It is a complex system of data gathering, interpretation, and data distribution.

The USPS IV platform operates as the central data distribution platform for all USPS letter and flat mail tracking. In most cases, tracking data is pushed to subscribers through SFTP, although the platform also allows for direct queries. The same platform manages other postal data feeds as well, including Informed Delivery statistics, financial data, and more. IV also has an online user interface (UI) that allows mail owners and service providers to manage data delegation, data feeds, and more. It is a very robust UI, but not simple to work with. It is not intuitive. One needs an in-depth knowledge of MIDs, CRIDs, scan types, and more to successfully navigate the UI. Users will include a cast of characters including your IV-BSA, your database manager, your address book manager...and more. It's an alphabet soup of roles – most of which are played by the same person in most organizations.

In addition to gathering and managing raw data feeds, the IV system uses business rules to create assumed and logical "events." These are processing milestones which are not necessarily documented by a physical scan of the piece of mail, but by another action that could be interpreted as an additional action. These events are critical to following mail on its entire trip through the postal system.

Why You Need a Mail Tracking Partner

Informed Visibility® is a data feed – it gathers raw scan data from postal equipment and distributes that same data to subscribers. There are no reports, just data. Generating reports requires a great deal of interpretation and knowledge of how mail travels. A single piece of mail will receive multiple scan records – often as many as ten scans per piece or more. Simply organizing and sorting the data is beyond many organizations, and then interpreting that data and creating accessible reports requires another level of development. Even the largest mailers typically choose to use a mail tracking service to manage the process.

SnailWorks ingests all the data, organizes and interprets it, as well as provides a variety of user-friendly reports. These reports can then be distributed to mail owners, mail service providers, and any other stakeholders as appropriate.

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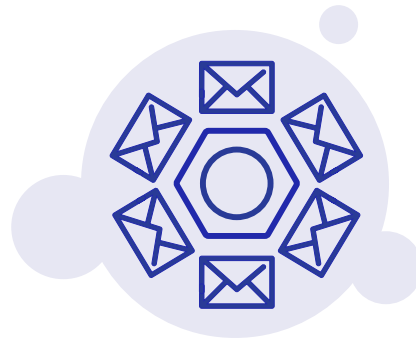
The Nuts and Bolts of Informed Visibility®

As a piece of mail goes through the mailing system, it may be scanned at various stops along the way as it is processed. In some cases, that scan is of the barcode on an actual mail piece as it travels through a sorter. In other cases, when that scan is of the container or tray, the pieces in the container will receive an "assumed" scan as they are associated with the container through electronic documentation provided by the mailer.
Since scans are not always of an actual piece of mail, these scans are referred to as "scan events." The different types of scan events break down into three primary types:

- **Actual Scans:** These are actual physical scans of the relevant mail object. Pieces are scanned as they travel through postal sorting equipment. Containers or pallets may be scanned as they arrive at postal facilities, as they are loaded or unloaded from trucks, or as they prepare to enter an operation. Bundles and trays are scanned on sorting equipment, or as they are prepared for operations. If you see an actual scan, you can be confident that the object scanned is exactly where the scan says it is.

- **Assumed Events:** Assumed events are tracking events based on scans of an object and assuming the pieces nested to it are there. For example, a pallet of trays may be scanned as it is removed from a truck. IV can identify what mail pieces are on that pallet based on the nesting provided in the eDocs for the mailing. In this instance an "assumed" scan event is assigned to each of those mail pieces identified in the eDoc as being on that pallet. This provides greater visibility into the travel of mail pieces earlier

in the process, although it may fall short in terms of proof of mailing. There are a number of events that may generate an assumed scan: the closing of a FAST appointment, a truck arrival, and more.

- **Logical Scan Events:** This type of scan event generally refers to when mail is carried to its delivery point. Actual or assumed scans can identify that a carrier has a mail piece in time to deliver it that day. When the carrier passes through the ZIP+4 boundary for the address, a logical scan event identifies that the mail piece was delivered.

Understanding and interpreting the scans provided by IV makes it possible to determine the delivery date for a piece of mail, as well as understanding the path it followed, and what irregularities may have happened along the way. It is also possible to anticipate the delivery date before the mail piece has been delivered.

As these scans occur on mailing equipment throughout the USPS system, scan data is transmitted to the IV platform if requested by the mailer. The request for tracking scan data is embedded in the Service Type ID (STID) within the Intelligent Mail barcode. The IMb also contains the Mailer ID (MID) that tells the IV system how to distribute data.

As a mailer, you can choose who will get the tracking data for the job. The IV system allows for the delegation of data to multiple parties. Most mailers have the data pushed directly to the mail tracking service.

What IV May Scan

- **Mail Pieces.** IV scans mail pieces as they travel through sorting equipment. Typically, for a letter, the last scan is seen as the mail is sequenced for the carrier.

- **Bundles.** Bundles may be scanned as they are sorted in large regional facilities. The IMb is scanned for the top piece in the bundle, so any other scan events for the other pieces are assumed – either by USPS or the subscriber. Many bundle scans are assumed scans based on the scanning of the container they are traveling in. If a bundle of mail is curtailed – held from delivery to even out carrier loads (load leveling) – the bundle should be scanned.

- **Trays and Sacks.** Trays and sacks in a mailing carry their own unique barcodes linked to the eDoc for the mailing. They may or may not be physically scanned depending on sortation level. More often, the scan event will be an assumed scan when their pallet is scanned. They may also be scanned when mail is curtailed.

- **Containers.** Containers are either pallets of mail or rolling Postal equipment. They will generally receive a physical scan as they are loaded and unloaded from trucks. They may also be scanned as a processing operation is started. Like trays and sacks, containers have their own unique IMbs which link back to the eDoc. Container scans are critical as they often are the source scan for assumed scans for the trays, bundles, and pieces they carry. Container scan events may also be assumed scans based on FAST appointments and truck arrivals.

The Business Benefits of Informed Visibility®

- **Logistics Management.** IV gives large mailers a way of ensuring mail was trucked to destinations on the expected schedule, and to make adjustments when mail is not accounted for.

- **Earlier Triggering.** By knowing where mail is early in the delivery process, coordinated marketing can be better timed to arrive before the mail, allowing more touch points with prospects.

- **Better Mail Accountability.** When mail does go astray – and it's not being delivered – IV provides tools for finding the mail. (Tracking back to the container the mail was sent in and finding out where it might be, and to get it moving. IV also allows monitoring of when mail entered the mail stream, providing mailers with better insight on how their mail is being handled by all parties).

- **Confirmation of Mailing.** With so much mail being entered into the Postal Service using Seamless Acceptance, the primary means of determining what was inducted, and when, is looking for first scans in Informed Visibility®.

Beyond Delivery – Innovative Uses of Mail Tracking

Most of what we have dealt with here regards the tracking of your outbound mail. As important, and sometimes more valuable, are more creative uses.

- **Inbound Mail Tracking.** Informed Visibility® is about more than outbound mail tracking. You can track response as well. For fundraisers, a simple change to the Intelligent Mail barcode on the reply envelope can provide how many people have responded every day, so you can prepare your inbound operations based on that volume. You can also use this information to confirm that your caging operation has received all the inbound mail. You can even know exactly who is responding by printing a unique inbound IMb on each reply.

- **Triggering Other Channels.** Informed Visibility® tracks mail at the piece level, so if one piece of mail gets delivered today, and my neighbor's gets delivered next week, Informed Visibility® knows, and you can align other channels perfectly with your mail. You can even create daily "trigger" files that send a file of each day's deliveries directly to an email service provider, an outbound telemarketer, or any other relevant channel.

- **Proof of Mailing.** No matter how you induct your mail – Seamless Acceptance, drop shipped, or commingled – Informed Visibility® provides you with the evidence of when your mail was taken into custody by the Postal Service. This is a great tool for mail service providers to give their customers peace of mind. In many cases, IV can be used to replace a Certificate of Mailing for due diligence requirements, although laws do vary by state and industry.

- **Automated Notices to Consumers.** Informed Visibility provides the kind of detailed tracking required to notify consumers that the delivery of a gift card, or small item in an envelope, is imminent.

Visibility and Insight into Your Mail Makes Direct Mail More Effective and Efficient

A successful mailing includes many essential activities – vendor coordination, caging operations, inbound telemarketing, coordinating other marketing channels, interpreting results, and more. Mail tracking can help to make all these more efficient. Knowledge and insight make the process better.

SnailWorks Mail Tracking
Informed Visibility® – Perfected

As powerful as Informed Visibility® is, you need an experienced partner to make it work for you. SnailWorks is the industry's premier mail tracking solution. We serve hundreds of resellers across the country who provide service to more than 14,000 organizations. We track billions of pieces of mail every year.

Why SnailWorks?

- A proven, scalable mail tracking platform, whether you need to track one piece or one billion.
- Customer–facing reports that you don't need to be a mailing expert to use.
- A variety of ways to share data – scheduled reports, customer dashboards, data feeds, API solutions, and more.
- A wide range of integrated services connected to mail tracking:
  o ACS services
  o Informed Delivery
  o Personalized QR codes
  o Trigger files
- Built for production, there are many easy and automated ways to create tracking jobs.
- Unmatched industry expertise and customer service.

Let SnailWorks show you how to get the most from Informed Visibility®!