

Computer Corner

It's Time to "Take Stock": Looking Forward, Looking Back



Here's a notice to city clerks and RWD office staff: If you mail out more than 500 bills monthly, have you followed the article in *The Kansas Lifeline* February 2011 issue "Play It Smart – Prepare for Intelligent Barcode Requirements" about IM Barcoding? Have you obtained your MailerID from the U.S. Postal Service? The new IM Barcode is scheduled to go into effect the end of January 2013. You may need to obtain an update from your software vendor to be able to meet the new IM Barcode requirement and continue getting the same postage discount you get now with CASS Mail Certification and Postnet Barcode printing. Depending on how some vendors implement the Barcode Printing, it may be necessary to obtain new hardware, hardware firmware or font library upgrades to be able to print the new barcodes. I've included the table of information about the new requirement in this article; see next page.

Depending on how some vendors are implementing the Barcode Printing, it may be necessary to obtain new hardware, hardware firmware or font library upgrades to be able to print the new barcodes.

Who's minding the store?

RWD board and city council members: Is a member of your governing body taking a few minutes each month to compare the payments received total from an end of month i.e. cycle cash receipts report or complete billing register to the utility money bank deposits total for the month/cycle. The two numbers should match to the penny. In addition to the payments received are the billed amounts, the past due amounts, the late charges and the balances, i.e. the amounts still due, being monitored? These numbers should come directly from the utility

software not a spreadsheet mocked up just for the board. Is any attention paid to an audit log, i.e. a record of hand edits made to customer records?

The honest, competent clerk will welcome the chance to show-off the good job he or she is doing and make it known that they run a tight ship. A less-organized clerk may find a greater incentive to keep more transparent, correct records. The dishonest and/or lazy or chaotic worker will be exposed. These checks only take a few minutes, yet they would have prevented 100 percent of the embezzlements we have seen in the last few years.

Taking Technological Inventory

Is your computer equipment and software more than five (5) years old? New and better computers are introduced into the market every week. Undoubtedly, the same goes for software; whatever software is being used likely has had updates, improvements or even entirely new, more technologically advanced versions released within the last five years.

Now is a great time computer upgrades. The world just recently went through another “technology leap”; this occurs every couple of years. Intel introduced new CPU technology and advancements in SSD (Solid State Drive – which have no moving parts) and SATA III technology (Serial Advanced Technology Attachment). As a result, all new generation computers much more powerful than before. Virtually all new computers are designed to take advantage of the capabilities of these new “brain” chips and the new 64-bit operating systems like Windows 7. This new generation of computers can handle information at least twice as fast as was previously possible. Hard drive technology, which has traditionally been the most limiting factor in the performance of desktop and laptop computers, has recently had a “leap” in technology resulting in 2x to 10x the previous performance. Even better, the prices for these technologies have dropped dramatically. The computer industry seems to be finally fully recovered from price increases and shortages caused by tsunamis and flooding in manufacturing areas. In some cases, price changes are so staggering as to make one not want to look at the receipt from a recently purchased computer. It can be a depressing experience. For example, one of the new technologies, no moving parts, (SSD Drives) was special ordered by one of my customers a year ago for \$300. That drive now sells for less than \$50, and is even better than it's slightly older, much more expensive predecessor.

Where have we been? Where are we going?

It's getting to be that time of the year when we “take stock” in our lives. Have you taken stock in your accomplishments for your water utility and community? Autumn brings the beautiful vistas of fall foliage and the crisp air that announces the approach of winter. Hunting seasons are upon us. The holiday's are coming. Soon, we'll have all those days when the house is filled with visiting relatives and the aroma of those special holiday foods being prepared. It will be tax time before you know it! And, the start of a fresh new year is just around the corner.

Business Customer Gateway Steps for Customers to Acquire a Mailer ID

1. Go to USPS.COM. The link to the Business Customer Gateway is in the lower right corner. This link will take you to the Login page.
2. A current user may “Sign In” with an existing Username and Password. New users should click “Sign Up.”
3. On the “New User” “Sign Up” screen, create a Username and Password. Then click “Continue.”
4. On the “Profile Account Type” screen, select “Business.” (“Personal” will send you back to USPS.COM.) Then click “Continue.”
5. Create your Business Profile. Red asterisks indicate required information. Then click “Continue.”
6. Verify your Company Account Information on the Company Profile Summary. Then click “Edit” or “Continue.”
7. Agree to the Privacy Act Statement. Then click “Continue.”
8. On the Select a Business Service screen, select “Mailer ID.” Then click “Continue.”
9. New Users will have to go through the Business Service Administrator (BSA) process, click “I certify....”, then click “yes”.
10. On the “Business Service Administrator (Access Granted)” Page, click “Continue.”
11. “Business Customer Gateway” page opens. Click “Sign Out” at the top of page.
12. Go to your email and open the email from USPS. Scroll down to and Click “Sign in and get started link”.
13. At the Business Customer Gateway page, Login with user name and password.
14. On the Gateway page, click on Mailer ID under Design and Prepare.
15. On the “Welcome to the Mailer ID System” page, click “Request a MID”.
16. At “Apply for MID” screen, use drop down arrow and select 9-digit MID, then select # of MIDs requested (1), then click “Request MIDs.”
17. At the next screen, select “automatically generate this MID” and select “Full/Basic Service”, then click “Request MIDs.”
18. At the next screen, system issues a new MID. Record this number and sign out.



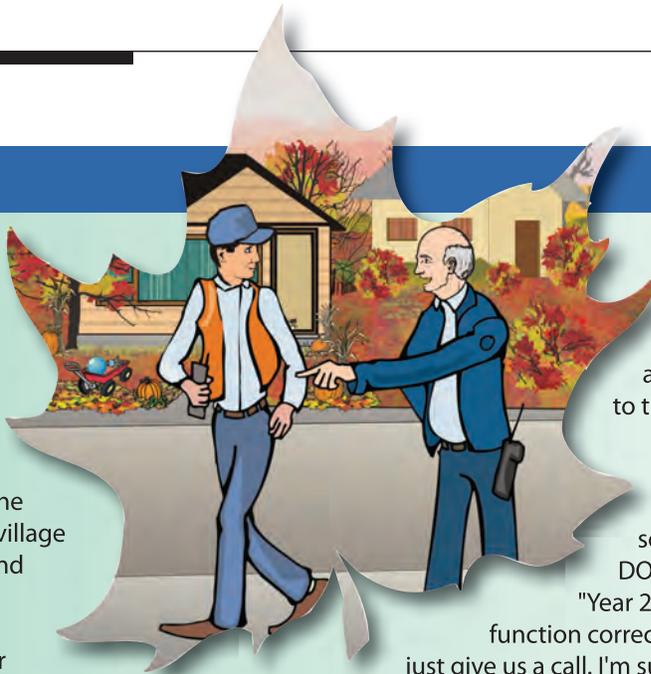
Sample of an Intelligent Mail®

It's time to be thankful for what blessings we have, good health, good friends, family, homes, and jobs. As I sit at my desk typing I am thinking of my niece arriving back in the states from her Tassia, her village near Nairobi, Kenya to spend two months with us helping with hospice care in our home for my 95-year old mother-in-law. Thinking of my niece and her life in Kenya makes me appreciate how lucky we are that we can walk into our kitchen, press a glass against a paddle on the refrigerator door, and out comes our choice of crushed or cubed ice – and cold, clean safe water. During the rainy seasons my niece harvests roof runoff water while the rest of the year, the dry season Kenyans must purchase water delivered by truck twice each week to replenish their water collection barrels. Of course, the water must always be boiled before it can be safely used for human consumption. She's been there for only six months and already contracted malaria twice. We don't even want to talk about the technological and cultural differences in lavatory facilities.

After purchasing the land and obtaining water right permits from the Kenyan government my niece and her husband have begun building the security walls around what is planned to be the well site and pumping station. Their hope is to supply affordable clean safe water for themselves and their neighbors as creating a source of income for their little family. But, all that may be another entire article.

We all have our trials and tribulations in life and though the part of the world we live in is host to a few serious problems, lyme disease, tornados, droughts, floods, etc., we have it pretty good here in Kansas. Yes, we should count our blessings. We have much to be thankful for.

This year, it seems I am seeing more and more retiring of the thousands of people we have provided training to over the more than 25 years we've been working in the Kansas water industry. With my wife Linda and I only in our mid-50s, I figure I'm good for at least another 20 years in the business. But, just in case, we've made arrangements that our software ownership and source code would go to a nephew with programming knowledge. And, should he not be able or have a desire to continue to support our customers or work out an arrangement to pass the work



along to one of the programmers that have worked for us, ownership of our software and source code will be transferred to the Kansas Rural Water Association.

So, for the couple of you water districts out there that have never upgraded even to our Windows software and are still using our OLD DOS Utility Billing software – when the "Year 2000 Date Bug Fix" I put in it fails to function correctly beginning on January 1, 2086, just give us a call. I'm sure it wouldn't be me answering the phone, but rather my nephew or other heir or possibly a Kansas Rural Water Association technician.

As a Kansas water professional, what plans have YOU made to ensure the knowledge and skills that you have acquired will continue to benefit your customers and water system long after you are gone? As a clerk or bookkeeper, will your replacement "bless your name" for leaving a wonderful legacy to follow – or curse you for the mess you left with an unplanned departure? As a board or council member, will future members be proud of what you have accomplished for your water system and community and want to build on your accomplishments? Or, will they need to start over and go a completely different direction?

I'm not sure how many times I've heard stories of the water system operator or maintenance guy who passed away suddenly and NO ONE knows the stuff that he knew about operating the system and special unique situations in the system. For example, I recall the day at a rural water office when the retired water operator walked into the office talking about how the system had inserted a 4-inch line inside a 6-inch line under the railroad trestle. Suddenly the new young operator's eyes lit up with a new understanding of problems being experienced on that section of the water system. Information needs to be passed along by being documented and put into the computer system. Each of us in this industry should be asking ourselves, "What is our legacy and what contributions have we made to our system and to our system and community?"

Merle Windler and his wife Linda are owners of Thoroughbred Systems, Topeka. The company specializes in software solutions for utilities and municipalities, computer networking and associated training. Contact: merlewindler@yahoo.com

