

SUMMARY REPORT FOR FOCUS GROUPS

Postal Service Five Day Operations

The following is a summary of impressions from two focus groups conducted in Bethesda MD on May 17, 2001. Respondents were household customers of the Postal Service who had some familiarity with mail coming into and leaving their household and who mailed at least five pieces of mail in an average month. One group included people with annual household incomes of less than \$60,000, the other, people with household incomes on more than \$60,000.

The objective of the interviews was to examine current weekend experience with Postal Service activities and to obtain reactions to the possible cessation of some or all of such activities.

Receipt of Mail

People are accustomed to receiving mail six days a week and likely to offer initial resistance to the concept of halting Saturday deliveries. However, as the interview proceeds, they become more and more comfortable with the idea.

The first driving force in wishing to retain Saturday delivery is habit. Saturday delivery has been part of their lives and to take it away is to introduce change. As usual, the first reaction to change is one of caution. Why should I be in favor of a change that adds nothing to my life and may even subtract from it?

During the interview, most of the initial justification for wanting Saturday delivery was of the form the "something good might happen." I might get a check or I might get an important letter. Nevertheless, as the interview proceeded, there was more and more realization that Saturday mail is much the same as mail received the rest of the week, that no one could identify recurring mail that is specifically associated with Saturday and that most of the mail they receive, as household customers, consists of advertising material, publications and bills. By the end of the interview, there was little interest in retaining Saturday delivery if it were to result in an increase in postal rates.

Sending Mail

Saturday is not seen as a big day for sending mail. While there might be some mailing to do at the end of the week, it seems to be more likely to be simply leftovers than it to be something of real importance. Of course, there were mentions of Saturday mailing emergencies but these were recognized as random emergencies that occurred infrequently and were not Saturday specific.

Keeping the Mail Moving

In all, people are not so concerned with an inability to enter mail on Saturday as they are with a vision of the mail sitting in one place over the weekend. If they are assured that the mail is still on its way to its destination, much of this concern is relieved.

Access to Post Offices

The idea that post offices might be closed on Saturday produces uneasiness. Saturday visits to the post office were not viewed as something that someone does regularly, but rather as part of a larger process of post office visits. Clearly, not everyone has the same degree of access to a post office. Some have easy access to their delivery office. Others can use a post office near their place of work. There are even situations where an employer provides many of the functions of a post office, on-site.

Yet, there remain people who do not have ready access to a post office during the week, and they see Saturday as the one day they can visit a post office. This concern is amplified when they consider their ability to pick up letters/packages after receiving a “yellow slip.” Those who work close to their delivery post office mention going during the workday, but others realize they do not have this option.

There is an almost universal belief that the busiest day at the post office is Saturday. For this reason, it must true that many people visit on that day. An interesting offshoot of this perception is that Saturday is cited as the one day to try to avoid visiting the post office.

Perhaps the single greatest reason for wanting to have post office open on Saturday is altruism. There are “people” who cannot get to the post office during the week, one can see them in the crowds at the post office on Saturday, and the post office should be open for them, if not for me.

Tuesday

When the subject of the Postal Service dropping deliveries on Tuesday, rather than Saturday, is brought up, the first reaction is one of disbelief. While Saturday is a “logical” day for such action, being different from other days because it is on a weekend, Tuesday is another matter. Being a weekday, businesses are open, and stopping Tuesday delivery may pose a threat to delivery on other weekdays. While objections to dropping Tuesday delivery are muted, it is clear that the whole matter makes people uneasy, if only because it is not something that they have ever thought about.

When presented with the option of stopping delivery and acceptance and counter service on Saturday, as opposed to stopping delivery only on Tuesday, household customer attitudes toward the Tuesday action become more favorable.

Holidays

While household customers can become flexible concerning Saturday operations, they make it very clear that they expect that special arrangements will be made for the holiday season; a time when postal activity peaks.

Perspective

Some of the misconceptions that are commonly encountered in research for the Postal Service arose during the interview. These include the belief that the Postal Service is being run into the ground by advertising mail that does not pay its way, that the Postal Service is heavily dependent upon support from tax dollars, and the Postal Services problems can all be traced to inefficiency. It is as if Household customers believe that the Postal Service provides a public service and should not be expected to break even on all its activities. The matter of keeping post offices open on Saturday falls into the area of public service.

Beneath the surface, there is considerable support for the Postal Service. Even the occasional person who has had a bad experience with the Postal Service comes around to the point that their mail service is generally good and that the price is right. If higher postal rates would head off closing post offices on Saturday, so be it. The household customer makes a brief calculation and decides that if a few additional dollars per year will maintain what is essentially a convenience for others, then it is a worthwhile expenditure. (This is not necessarily what a business mailer with a multimillion-dollar postage bill will think.) A woman summed up one group's position when she noted that it would not be unreasonable to put a 45-cent stamp on the envelope for a four-dollar greeting card.

Without prodding, the respondents started to worry about backups in the mail stream resulting from the Saturday closings. If Monday is already a busy day, what will it be like with the volume delayed from Saturday? Will employees be able to handle the load? Such questions reveal an important communications opportunity for the Postal Service. Changes in service should be supported with explicit discussions of why those changes will be made, how the public will be affected by them and what the Postal Service intends to do to mitigate the adverse effects of the changes.