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Loose in the Mails and in the Skies

By Sandra K. Paul, President, SKP Associates

When I told Katina that I couldn't write this column because I was flying all over the country visiting Bulk Mail Centers, she asked that I tell you why. So here goes!

Do you know what happens if you mail something wonderful to a friend and it comes out of its packing in the mails? It goes to auction, in a big basket, along with other like things — from women's underwear to food-stuffs and antiques. That is true, unless you sent a book, record, cassette or CD. Several years ago the U.S. Postal Regulations were changed, so that publishers of books and music can apply to get their property back instead of having it auctioned off. Why, you ask, should book and music publishers be so privileged?

The answer is in their terms of sale. Most books and music was sold by publishers with a 100% return privilege. If the book doesn't sell in the store, it's the publisher's fault for having created this unique and unsalable item. The bookstore simply puts it out and hopes that customers will buy it. You've read about the returns dilemma in everything from Leonard Shatzkin's *In Cold Type* to a recent two-page "My Say" in *Publishers Weekly* by Literary Agent Richard Curtis.

Well, unscrupulous retailers sent agents to the auctions, purchased the "hampers" of books and returned them to the publishers for 100% credit. In addition, of course, the publisher had to re-ship the book to the organization to which the original shipment was destined. Soooo, publishers convinced Congress that this was unfair and the books should be returned to them by the Post Office. The Post Office then started building a computer-based list of "Trade Names" under which book and music publishers publish. That

list may have been manageable before I became involved, but I can tell you that the most recent listing is 84 pages long and the first page includes the following:

TRADE NAME	RETURN TO
AAA	Macmillan
AAA Road Atlas	Random House
AAA/Avenues, Inc.	Harlequin Books

It also shows that Mosby-Yearbook should be returned to Mosby, but Mosby-Yearbook Medical should be returned to Arcata Graphics.

You don't have to be a genius to realize that lots of books are being sent to the wrong publisher or to auction because the postal clerk responsible for the "Loose in the Mails" section, as it's called, can't decide what to do with that book!

In an attempt to change the situation, the Association of American Publishers undertook a new project two years ago. They hired SKP Associates to write the necessary programs to allow a postal clerk to scan the Bookland EAN bar code on the back cover of most books and then see, on his or her computer screen, the name and address of the publisher to which the book should be returned, if the publisher was registered in the U.S. Postal Service returns program. We did it, and tried it out for a year in the Greensboro, SC Bulk Mail Center. After some bugs were worked out, they just loved the speed and accuracy. Random House could buy Crown Publishing and they had the change sent to them, on a new diskette, the same week the central Post Office sent them the semi-annual updating of the list — which, as you might suspect, provides not one clue as to what has changed since last time. You have to go through, name by name, to find out.

With the smashing success of the Greensboro test, you might assume that the Post Office would implement the system in all of the 21 Bulk Mail Centers around the country. No, that's too easy. Although the Association of American Publishers is willing to provide free, updated software every six months, implementation requires the purchase of a simple DOS-based computer (the kind without a hard drive now available for under \$200 on down the street) and a scanner which costs \$1,221 on a government contract. Because of the scanner cost, each Bulk Mail Center (affectionately known as a BMC) was asked to make their own decision.

ENTER SANDY PAUL. Have a scanner and software and will travel. At this writing I am just back from LA, San Francisco and Seattle and getting ready for a midwestern swing covering 7 BMCs in 7 days — and that includes a weekend in Minneapolis without any meetings! By the end of April I will have seen the inside of all the U.S. BMCs except Des Moines, IA, which only receives 15 to 30 books loose in the mail each week and felt it was not worth my time to visit, kind souls.

Yes, the program works. If a publisher does not bar code the jacket or cover, the Loose in the Mails clerk can key in the ISBN Publisher Prefix faster and with more accuracy than he or she could possibly find a name on that 83 page listing. If the book is shrink wrapped, the scanner still works. The system sells itself, with just a little help from me.

So far so good; everyone has said "Yes" or "I'll speak to my boss." Let's hope, before the end of the year, they'll all be scanning and there will be a little less CHAOS in the U.S.P.S. BMCs. ☘