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The PostalVision 2020 Initiative

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This article provides an overview of an exciting new initiative that is all about re-inventing the United States' postal ecosystem for the future. That ecosystem currently adds up to a trillion dollar industry!

'What would Google do?'

"What would Google do?" The question was raised in recognition of the alarming impact e-substitution was having on mail during a gathering of postal executives at an International Mail Advisory Group reception. "They'd give every household a computer and a printer," replied Postal Regulatory Commissioner Ruth Goldway. (She had not been named PRC Chairman at that time.)

The intriguing question and inventive reply stayed with me until I coincidentally happened upon Jeff Jarvis's new book similarly entitled "*What Would Google Do?*" I was stunned by its relevance to our postal industry. So much of what the best selling author and popular digital media blogger observed about Google's unimaginable success could be applied to a complete reinvention of the postal service in the United States. And I felt the spirit of this thinking should be brought to life in an unprecedented conversational initiative.

Jeff Jarvis agreed with me. I proposed that he become personally involved and he instantly grasped the national societal significance of such a dialogue. When describing the anecdote and Commissioner Goldway's comment, he said: "Good thinking, but they'd have to provide broadband to every household as well." He got the message. He even grasped the issue of the Universal Service Obligation.

My idea was not to literally consider what Google would do if it were a postal service, of course. But it was meant to provoke and stimulate the kind of creative thinking that invented the disruptive innovations that were now unquestionably and rapidly substituting for all conventional mail products. And it would at least help conventional victims of digital disruption comprehend what was happening to their faltering institutions.

The Ethos of The PostalVision 2020 Initiative

Inspired by the ideas that Jarvis expressed in "*What Would Google Do?*" The PostalVision 2020 Initiative has been conceived to envision the American postal ecosystem of the future. It has

taken life as an independent initiative designed to ignite imaginative thinking and to stimulate provocative conversation about what the United States' postal service should be in 2020 and beyond.

What sets this initiative apart from all other postal events and conferences is the following ten key elements. These elements define its ethos.

As an **Initiative**, it is the beginning of an activity that will progress and build momentum through conversation towards a set of definitive outcomes by a target date of 2020. It is more than a series of events.

It will **Envision** and imagine a future state for postal services that will serve current and future generations.

It is about the entire **Postal Ecosystem** in America, at the heart of which is the United States Postal Service that currently pumps lifeblood through an essential trillion dollar industry.

It is **Independent**, to ensure objectivity, openness, and inclusion of all opinions, conventional and disruptive alike.

It is **Provocative**, bold and daring and is meant to incite uncomfortable discourse and debate about an unwelcome, possibly radical, yet certainly inevitable, change.

It is **Innovative** and all about inventive approaches to product solutions, especially digital.

As a **Conversation**, it takes the form of dialogue and encourages varied ideas and opinions expressed from diverse points of view.

It is **Transformational** in nature, accepting that the current postal business model must be reinvented and reconfigured to serve future societal needs; and is transitional, recognising that any outcomes must consider how to get from current to future state.

It is **Responsible** to mission and to a national governmental obligation to serve societal needs.

It is **Constructive, optimistic, opportunistic** and open to the positive promise of something new.

'A smashing success'

The Postal Vision 2020 Initiative commenced its inaugural conference in Crystal City, Virginia, on June 15 2011. This one day event featured a stellar cast of speakers covering disruptive electronic media trends, the impact of digital innovation on postal products, governmental policy issues restricting change and a sampling of digital product innovations. This was followed by a discussion involving a distinguished panel of postal officials and regulators.

Google's Chief Internet Evangelist and the widely acknowledged co-inventor of Internet protocol, Vint Cerf, presented keynote remarks. Jeff Jarvis opened the day's discussion himself, slinging the first incendiary thought by declaring that "digital is always going to be faster, cheaper and more efficient, which leads to a fairly simple rule — if it can be digital, it will be

digital.” MIT professor, Marshall Van Alstyne, helped to position the concept of the postal service as a platform. USPS leadership and regulatory officials, Deputy Postmaster General Ron Stroman, Postal Regulatory Commission Chairman Ruth Goldway and Inspector General David Williams considered all the issues in a final panel discussion.

A diverse group of 150 registrants from across the postal community, including major mailers and suppliers, USPS managers, labour union officials, innovating entrepreneurs, government officials, academics and an inquisitive press contingent gathered to listen to the inspiring speakers.

Charles Prescott, the well respected writer of *The Prescott Report*, highly praised the conference: *“This was without a doubt the most inspiring “what about the post office” event we have attended on the American continent, and we hold it a smashing success.”* (For a comprehensive list and review of each of the speaker’s presentations as well as an objective and astute analysis of the moderated panels, read Prescott’s series at www.prescottreport.com.)

Issues emerging

The deleterious impact of digital disruptive innovation on First Class Mail was accepted as fact. There was no argument with the proposition that a letter dependent volume based business model has become obsolete; nor that the USPS was rapidly entering a financial crisis.

And while there was considerable agreement that eventual solutions would depend upon “Acts of Congress,” the PostalVision 2020 agenda deliberately avoided discussion about any immediate fix. The conversation remained true to visionary considerations for future generations.

The mission of the United States Postal Service “to bind the nation together” and to provide universal service was generally validated. The issues of its relevance in a modern world of digital communications and limitations on universality were left open for further consideration at subsequent sessions.

The government’s role to meet the needs of society was accepted, while the determination of those future needs would require further discussion as well. Regulatory constraints were acknowledged as a hindrance to change. There was general consensus that representation from Congress would be required in further conversations.

USPS’ key assets and values were identified as uniquely governmental and perhaps extendable into a digital future. Trust in identity management, privacy and security as enforced by federal law may find receptivity in the current inchoate state of unregulated online communications.

A key theme to arise was “What relationship should the USPS have with private sector players?” A more deliberate approach to partnering was generally endorsed as a way to instill sorely needed innovation. While the postal service may develop new digital products itself, cultural and regulatory constraints are likely to minimise any real inventiveness and yet inventiveness is something the private sector abounds in.

Expanding the postal platform

Perhaps the most powerful topic to evoke thoughtful discussion was one proposed in the Office of Inspector General (OIG) white paper, entitled *“The Postal Service Role in the Digital World, Part Two, Expanding the Postal Platform.”* The concept of the postal platform became the focus of much conversation. To quote The Prescott Report:

“Jennifer Tomlinson of Innovapost and Marshall van Alstyne of MIT agreed very quickly that “it’s all about the platform” and the digital and physical platforms of the USPS need to be more closely linked. They called for more openness by the USPS with respect to standards and increased partnership activity with the private sector. Great individual products don’t always create major success. Sometimes you need a platform strategy, such as Apple has created. The iPad is a platform and it does what the Kindle does.....It’s more than a device; it is a platform that displaced its competitors and on which developers create other products, called “apps”. However, this sandbox only works and the platform only produces innovations if many others are welcomed into it, as with Twitter. You need to let others play in and on your platform. [At this, the unstated sentiment hung heavy in the room: the USPS has a reputation of being slow, bureaucratic, difficult to come to terms with, and an acquirer/adaptor/user of other peoples’ ideas. In short, not a good sandbox owner, but someone who takes others’ toys without saying ‘thank you’.]”

What is next?

Not every idea could be expressed in a single day nor every viewpoint heard. Representatives from Congress were absent, distracted by a hearing on Capitol Hill. Next generation millennial “digital natives” were in short supply and relatively few participants from foreign posts were present. These constituencies and a greater number of entrepreneurial opportunists will be invited to Postal Vision 2020/2.0.

PostalVision2020 is off and running. Planning is underway for the next conference, during which the postal platform model will be thoroughly explored. The next event, scheduled for June 2012, is being considered for dual simulcast in Washington and Silicon Valley, with virtual live attendance via telepresence. Developments and details will be announced at www.postalvision2020.com, and progress will be reported at the World Mail & Express Americas Conference in Miami in February 2012.