

Top Ten Ways to Error-Proof Your Mail



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Identifying and eliminating the root cause of the most common errors

Back in the 1980s, a major phone handset manufacturer developed a business management strategy known as Six Sigma — where companies proactively took steps to improve quality by identifying and eliminating the cause of errors. The name “Six Sigma” comes from the manufacturing industry and describes a process where 99.99% of the output is defect free.

When you think about it, all of us involved in the creation and production of mail are in the manufacturing industry. We start with inputs and raw materials, manage processes, and yield a finished product that is built to certain specifications.

For many years, some mailers assumed that a certain percent of “defects” were simply part of doing business. Today, with rising costs, stricter regulations and heightened expectations, market leaders are taking steps to identify and eliminate the root cause of these errors. While most of us are already running pretty tight operations, there's always room for improvement.

Error-proofing mail is often necessary to control costs, but risk management is also a top business priority. There are the ever-mounting compliance requirements such as HIPAA, Sarbanes-Oxley and Graham-Leach-Bliley — not to mention expanding global regulations. Mailers need to quickly respond to these challenges, anticipate evolving needs and seize new opportunities, all while operating within more stringent controls. On top of all that, we have internal mandates to significantly enhance mail-piece appearance, while improving processing performance and reliability.

The bottom line is that we need to improve our processes and error-proof our mail. There are many software and hardware systems and solutions in place available today that can help us get there, but just what should we be looking for when we implement these systems?

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In speaking with major mailers, we've uncovered ten best practices that outline what solutions should be able to do in today's business climate:

1. **Barcode Identifiers.** Solutions need to be able to assign a unique identity for each page in a mailing, giving you the ability to track and trace each page as it travels through your system. The ability to assign a unique barcode to each page is imperative, as this may be the only way you can verify that a mailing was produced, processed and prepared for shipment.
2. **Early Tracking.** Before a document becomes a piece of mail, tracking must begin. Hardware and software solutions need to enable oversight from start to finish. After a document is created, it must be identified and tracked before it is printed and becomes a piece of mail.
3. **Start-to-Finish Validation.** The importance of validation becomes more evident when we consider that we must know the "as planned" information in advance, in order to validate against any future errors. If your solutions and operators have knowledge of what's supposed to be produced, it can be compared to what to what is actually produced, and validation can be achieved.
4. **Accurate Metadata.** Since documents and mailpieces are rarely a one-to-one relationship anymore, your solutions must be able to recognize the metadata associated with an individual mailpiece—and mailpieces are rarely limited to one piece of paper. As multiple documents or pages are often contained in one envelope your solutions must be able to verify that the correct documents, with the correct numbers of pages, are delivered to the correct addresses.
5. **Piece-level Tracking.** Growing privacy concerns mean that solutions should be able to track and trace, and drill down as deeply as one individual piece of mail. Think about HIPAA: your customer's medical information cannot be delivered to someone else. That could be disastrous for the customer, and your operation.
6. **Audit Capabilities.** Your solutions must have auditability, especially with all those privacy concerns in mind. How do you know that every piece entered the correct envelope and then entered the mailstream? Your solutions should be able to generate a report that can prove that happened, and show history that an individual mailpiece was assembled correctly and delivered.
7. **Preference Management.** Hybrid mailing is increasing in importance every day. Can your solutions recognize when and where a document is to be physically printed, when it is only electronic delivery or when it is a hybrid mailing? This is important since this flexibility can help drive lower paper volumes and avoid unnecessary printing. There's an added boost to customer satisfaction when you communicate via their preferred channel.
8. **Print Stream Engineering.** Can you combine smaller jobs to increase efficiency? Do your solutions have the ability to share jobs across multiple networked inserters as needed, while maintaining job integrity assurance? Is it able to eliminate the guesswork involved with sophisticated document merging, including matched pieces from multiple inserters?
9. **Jam Recovery.** What happens when there is a jam, or a crinkled piece of paper in your processing? Your inserter must track every sheet of paper at all times; and know where the sheets are, if they jam, crinkle, overlap or mis-feed. Form printing to insert; any operation can benefit when tightly controlled by an integrated control system.

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10. **Automatic Reprints.** Some solutions require human intervention to resolve an issue or manually assemble mailpieces within the work cell. The assumption, then, is that the operator has followed a process accordingly. Of course, a manual process is not necessarily. Today, manual processes may no longer be good enough, especially with today's privacy regulations. Do you have an automated touch and toss process – if an operator touches it, does it get thrown out? Can your solution then take the unique identifier on that damaged page and create the reprint? This process could allow the controls and tracking needed to ashore accurate mailpiece recover.

Each of these best practices can help streamline processes, lower operational costs and improve the quality of mail. However, organizations should consider an end-to-end integrated print and mail solution for even greater success with driving error-free mail. Integrated solutions provide seamless processes integration, improved workflow and increased efficiencies and ultimately yield greatest level of integrity needed to produce error-free mail. Non-integrated solutions, disparate bolt-on solutions, and manual steps can leave process gaps and room for error.

Another benefit of an integrated solution is they are typically more scalable to allow smaller operations to start with an appropriate level of integrity they need and then easily expand as their changing needs demand. And, as an added benefit, integrated solutions streamline processes and lower operational costs.

If your mail inserting applications are less complex – or your equipment budget is holding you back – consider getting started with solutions that provide a foundation that can be easily upgraded to accommodate high mailing volumes, and sophisticated applications and equipment.

At the end of the day, it's all about process. But it starts with the mindset that quality is important and achievable—if you take the time to identify and eliminate the imperfect solutions that lead to errors. Best of all, as you approach a 99.99% level, you'll benefit from lower costs, fewer manual processes and more satisfied customers.

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