

# The Coeur d' Alene Press

## **Slower mail not so bad**

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With the U.S. Postal Service's budget cuts, we'll have to wait longer and plan earlier for next year's mail. I'm surprised it took this long. Email and other technological changes are forcing the old-fashioned letter - which I sorely miss - to go the way of the dinosaur.

Even if mail service averages a day longer than we're used to and costs another penny or two, Americans aren't so bad off. According to the CATO institute and 2010 data, the same letter which costs 44 cents here for domestic mail service would cost 64 cents in Great Britain, 77 cents in Germany, 83 cents in Japan, and a whopping \$1.25 in Norway. The European commission reports with few exceptions delivery times are close to the same, if not worse.

Nor are we the only ones experiencing change. Europe is heading piecemeal toward postal liberalization. This trend includes variations of privatization/elimination of postal monopolies and selling off shares of national postal services to private owners or individual citizens. Examples of the fait accompli include Germany, the Netherlands, New Zealand and Sweden. The U.K. and E.U. are on announced paths to liberalization. Certain patterns are thus emerging: Prices haven't risen (in some countries, they decreased), but productivity has; costs are down and on-time delivery is holding steady.

Germany is about the highest volume and most privatized of the bunch. Deutsche Post World Net modernized its compensation structure and domestic mail networks, imported managers from other industries for a shot of creative thinking, and added new products such as hybrid mail and e-commerce. DPNW also branched into banking.

Our USPS is an odd animal. While it is a federal agency, it's semi-independent and supposed to be mostly self-supporting, with neutral (not profitable) revenue. Taxes did support the mail until the Postal Reorganization Act of 1970. Since then it's still statutorily authorized, but has some of the powers of private business, such as the capacity to sue and be sued independently, own property, and enter into contracts. Then again, it's exempt from taxation.

As with most struggling businesses, creativity will be crucial to survival, and survival is becoming an unavoidable issue for traditional mail. Except in Luxembourg and Slovenia where mail volume has actually increased, drops in letter volume since 2004 range from about 8 percent (Italy) to 20 percent (Norway), according to the European Commission. The USPS first class mail volume is down 29 percent over the last decade, according to Dec. 5 news reports.

On the other hand, who wants to pay FedEx or DHL rates for grandma's birthday card? I for one sure hope I can keep the short walk to mail it curbside, instead of adding to my list of driving errands to post Christmas cards. And there's something to be said for waiting, in this age of lightning-speed expectations and emails fired off without first thinking. Quality can take time, and is worth the wait.

"Everybody gets so much information all day long that they lose their common sense." - Gertrude Stein

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