

## **Star 'n Cones**

**By Harry Stephens**

Anyone who knows me well knows I love everything about the mail. Even when I travel, I like to visit the local post office to see what it is like—particularly in countries outside the U.S. Recently, I was in Italy on a trip that took us from Rome to hilltop towns built up to 10 centuries ago and to Florence. It was quite a trip with our driver (Paulo) who explained the history of things along the way. Of course, my request was always to stop in each town to see how they managed their mail. What I learned was the post offices in Italy don't resemble any post office we have here in the United States. Unlike here, where we view the post office as a place to buy stamps and send packages, the Poste Italiane is a place where you can accomplish all sorts of tasks.

You can pay certain bills, collect a pension check, renew a passport and even buy health insurance. Seriously—you can. It is also a competitive operator in the area for financial and payment services: savings accounts, interest-bearing bonds, national and international money orders.

Additionally, you can shop for things like books, CDs and even cell phones. There are posters all around promoting these things and there are consultants on site to help you with whatever you need. In Florence, when I entered the door of the Poste, I saw a machine that dispenses numbered tickets based on what you were planning to do there. Then, similar to the DMV, you waited until your number came up on the screen. The Florence post office was a veritable hub of activity.

Standing there I started thinking about our post offices—what may be missing and it sparked an idea (if you read my column, you know I have made several) for an option that might help alleviate some of the financial burden it carries. If European towns use the post office as a hub for other things besides mail, why can't we? I know we can't let a government institution go into banking or sell insurance. Private enterprise would not allow it. But how about getting support from private enterprise in another way?

For example, what if a company like Starbucks® stepped up and decided to help out the situation by creating a franchise model that would rent space from the USPS, similar to how the USPS operates within a Staples store? Or a telecommunications provider, like Verizon® or T - Mobile® have a franchise model that rented space from the USPS? If it was the type of products and services people wanted, and the franchise was located within the USPS real estate, perhaps it would spur activity around the post office itself, encourage local involvement and help offset the costs of operating the building.

This idea strikes me as particularly relevant for local post offices in rural areas where services like the ones mentioned are needed and not always available. A model like this might be a good gesture on the part of a company like Starbucks or Verizon and bring in more foot traffic to help keep our smaller post offices open. A few years ago there was a survey that found at least 6,000 post offices in the U.S. served a volume of only 3.3 people each day. 3.3! People in these areas don't want to lose their post office—or their jobs. So if it's some of my earlier suggestions, like “no work Wednesdays,” or decreeing “Saturday a day of rest” that might help save the USPS—or sharing space with Star 'n Cones—the point is we all know something has to change.

Until next time,

Harry

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*Harry Stephens is President/CEO, and founder of DATAMATX, one of the nation's largest privately held, full-service providers of printed and electronic billing solutions. As an advocate for business mailers across the country, Stephens is actively involved in several postal trade associations. He serves on the Executive Board of the Greater Atlanta Postal Customer Council, Board Member of the National Postal Policy Council (NPPC), Member of Major Mailers Association(MMA), and member of the Coalition for a 21<sup>st</sup> Century Postal Service . He is also immediate past president of the Imaging Network Group (INg), an association for Print/Mail Service Bureaus. As an expert on high-volume print and mail, he has frequently been asked to speak to various USPS groups, including the Board of Governors, about postal reform and other issues affecting business mailers. Find DATAMATX at [www.datamatx.com](http://www.datamatx.com).*

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