

# Best Practices in Thwarting MERLIN Concerns

BY C. CLINT BOLTE

**The U.S. Postal Service's new MERLIN program can save mailers money, but only if they strictly adhere to its guidelines**

**G**overnment acronyms sometimes take on a life of their own, particularly during the initial shakedown phases for new systems and procedures. Such is the case with the Mailing Evaluation Readability Lookup Instrument (MERLIN), built under exclusive contract to the United States Postal Service by Bell & Howell.

Let's begin with the basics. Just as the printing industry has passed along substantial typesetting savings to its clients who write and design their own material prior to printing, the USPS offers discounts for mailing projects whose specifications, including individual addresses, are sufficiently standardized to allow the entire mailing to run through the USPS automated sorting equipment with minimal hiccups. The USPS has now implemented procedures focused around MERLIN to verify barcode readability and consistency, along with a number of other direct mail manual (DMM) standards criteria. Better preparation of the mail and good, consistent quality attainable by all vendors is beneficial for the industry and will lead to lower USPS costs.

Some 1,200 MERLIN units have been installed at Business Mail Entry Units (BMEU) throughout the nation. The units are owned by the USPS and operated by its employees. Here is how the grading system works. If the MERLIN read rates (in compliance) on sampled items from a job equals or exceeds 90%, the entire job receives the full automation rate requested. If the read rate is between 80-89%, a partial adjustment is made to the discount, which calls for additional postage being paid. For example, if the read rate is 84%, additional postage is assessed on 16% of the entire single rate mailing. If the read rate falls below 80%, the entire mailing loses the automation rate and is charged the higher applicable presort rate.

Not every job is run through MERLIN, but those that do follow this sampling guideline. If the job has more than 10,000 pieces, 1,000 are run through the MERLIN. For less than a 10,000-piece job, 500 pieces are run through MERLIN. For flats, the minimum number of samples is 15 if each item weighs 5 ounces or less in a five-digit sort.

The printer or mailer can appeal the ruling and

send the appropriate sample quantity by USPS Express Mail to the designated Bell & Howell facility in Wheeling, Ill. Regardless of the results of the original MERLIN test, the appeal test is final; no "averaging" the two results or picking the better of the two.

The DMM standards for barcode placement include an eighth-inch minimum clearance around the entire address, either in the window or on the label or piece; one twenty-fifth-inch minimum clearance above and below the barcode; the barcode has to be at least a half an inch from the edge of the piece; and the barcode must be in the specified "clear zone," which is at least five-eighths of an inch from the bottom of the piece. A template available from the USPS illustrates these parameters.

The Mailing and Fulfillment Service Association ([mfsanet.org](http://mfsanet.org)) has been monitoring the progress of the MERLIN implementation, hosting symposiums and Webinars on the leading-edge BMEU case studies, serving as a clearinghouse for concerns as expressed on its Web chat list, and participating as one of the dedicated industry sources for current information on USPS rulings and updates on DMM. On one of the MFSA Webinars, Wanda Senne, the postal affairs manager for ACE Marketing Service, described what her company learned in arriving at a disciplined program to ensure that they passed the MERLIN tests. The following procedures were put in place for its Scitex Inkjet Unit. Obviously, similar criteria can be confirmed for every other inkjet unit.

- Ensure that the print head is level and perpendicular to the edge of the piece.
- Confirm that the fluids installed in the printer are approved for use in that model.
- Lower the print head as close as possible to the piece.
- Verify the phase and voltage settings.
- Adjust resolution and print density to enhance visual print quality.
- Select Postnet font (only OCR readable fonts) with characteristics appropriate for the job.
- Assure 22 bars per inch, plus or minus 2. For example, 120 dpi resolution would have a range of 20-24 bars per inch.

Hank Cleffi, MFSA's director of postal affairs, has organized a number of Webinars involving early companies serving as BMEUs for the MERLIN units. Several of the highlights of these PowerPoint presentations are available on the MFSA Web site (search for MERLIN).

### Best Practices in Assuring MERLIN Compliance

The following are a series of best practices that each printer or mailer might consider incorporating into their mailing management operation. Keep in mind that the pioneering users have only been at it for a few months, so printers and mailers just getting started can catch up quickly.

- Monitor USPS ([usps.com/merlin](https://usps.com/merlin)) and association ([mfsanet.org](https://mfsanet.org)) Web sites for late breaking MERLIN news.
- When printing barcodes, follow DDM specs; monitor job using USPS barcode error reference guide.
- Pretest samples for barcode readability.
- Communicate barcode concerns, piece design and other MERLIN issues to your customers and staff regularly.
- Establish internal quality control procedures to include quality testing for all types of mail that your company produces.
- Identify USPS contact points before problems arise.
- Review all MERLIN test results and diagnostic reports (additional reports are available on request). Share the test results concerning inkjet print quality with the inkjet operators to give them constructive feedback.
- If your mailing fails, compare reports to actual failed pieces.
- If a first-hand review of failed pieces indicates DMM compliance (there appears to be a MERLIN misread), don't hesitate to appeal in a timely fashion.

- Consider attending four-day USPS MERLIN training in Norman, Okla. (Call Byron Jacobson at 405-366-4639).

A series of ongoing concerns that might have slipped by in the bygone days will require closer scrutiny before passing MERLIN's "eye."

First, there are glossy, porous and certain background stocks where barcodes won't dry properly, "bleed," or background "noise" of recycled stock or certain security or colored stocks result in incorrect reads. Second, inconsistent folds and trims will make pieces feed cocked through the MERLIN. Third, some window sizes are inadequate with a five-line address to allow the necessary space around the address while accommodating "tap down."

Many of these issues can be avoided with early intervention and planning with the client and client's design team. Bring your substrate supplier in for testing or to pass along compatible results from others of his printer/mailers.

The envelope industry as a whole needs to consider phasing out the standard No. 10 windows, as it is often borderline acceptable to Merlin. Some envelope suppliers wisely offer a "MERLIN No. 10 window" envelope that has a window that is one and a quarter inches tall and is a full five-eighths of an inch from the bottom edge of the envelope.

MERLIN stringently enforces standards that have been around for some time. Vendors that have upfront relationships with their clients, have trained, meticulous crews, and run well-maintained equipment should encounter few adverse run-ins with MERLIN.

Over the longer term, MERLIN can contribute to smoothing mail flow, improving predictable delivery times and helping contain postal costs. In the meantime, this is an excellent opportunity for trade associations to show their worth as effective facilitators, trainers, communicators and reasonable protagonists. **TSR**