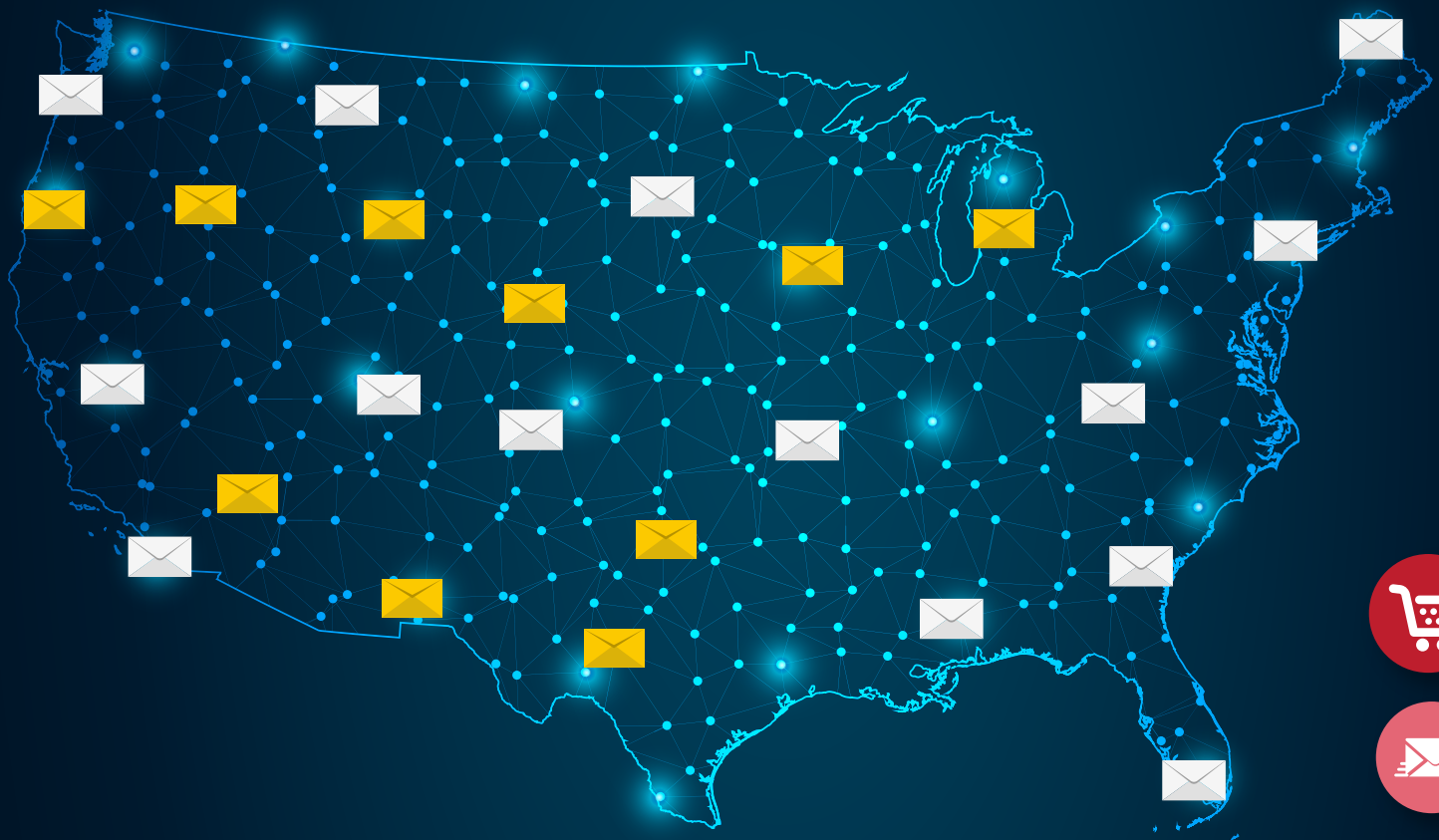
Informed Visibility®

THE STATE OF THE ART IN MAIL VISIBILITY



by Dave Lewis
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SNAILWORKS
COORDINATED DIRECT MARKETING PLATFORM

Informed Visibility

The State of the Art in Mail Visibility

On December 31, 2017, the US Postal Service turned off the IMb Tracing system and switched all mail tracking to the new Informed Visibility(IV®) platform. Certainly, if one is in the business of tracking mail this is a Big Deal. For mail owners and mail service providers, this will add some new capabilities that may add value to mail.

Our objective here is to provide some, um, visibility into what Informed Visibility is, how it is different from IMb Tracing, and how it may impact your business.

Specifically, we will cover the following topics:

- Why we track mail
- Defining Informed Visibility (IV)
- How IV differs from IMb Tracing – and how it doesn't
- IV Scan Types:
    - Actual scans;
    - Logical events;
    - Assumed events.
- What IV may scan:
    - Mail pieces;
    - Bundles;
    - Trays and sacks
    - Containers;
    - Trucks and appointments.
- Business benefits of IV
- Visibility+™, SnailWorks' IV solution

A Brief History of Mail Tracking

Mail tracking is a relatively recent capability for letter and flat size mail which really began with the advent of the PLANET code in 1999. The PLANET code was a second barcode that could be printed on a mail piece to identify the sender and send scan data back to that sender as mail passed through automated sorting equipment. At that time, the program was called the Confirm program. This data allowed mailers to calculate with good accuracy when their mail was being delivered. At least it was accurate for letter size mail. Flats were more problematic, as they simply weren't as automated in their processing as letters. If a mail piece doesn't get scanned, then there is no scan data, and thus no tracking.

The PLANET code was replaced in 2006 by the Intelligent Mail barcode (IMb). The IMb allowed the use of a single barcode on the piece, and provided greater tracking detail through additional digits – every piece of mail could have its own "license plate." The new barcode also allowed for additional services, such as built in Address Change Service (ACS). The PLANET code did stick around for a few more years, but IMb Tracing, as the new program was called, was the de facto means of mail tracking.

IMb Tracing provided tracking information on individual pieces of mail. Pallets of mail and shipments of mail were generally tracked by the PostalOne! program through a service called Surface Visibility (SV). SV relied on Postal Service employees physically scanning a pallet placard. Not all employees scanned the placards as expected, and not all facilities participated in SV, so the data was not as robust as piece data provided by IMb Tracing.

Why we track mail

All of this begs the question – why DO we track mail?

Mail production is a process and the mail producer is generally accountable to the mail owner – their customer – to track mail production through their process: Printing the mailing components, doing addressing and personalization, and submitting that mail to the Postal Service for delivery. For decades, providing a proof of mailing was considered satisfactory for the completion of the project – now it was in the Postal Service's hands.

Of course the process isn't really done until that piece of mail is in the postal customers' hands. With that delivery data available, progressive mailers began providing tracking services as part of their standard service and more mail owners began to demand it. In addition to this accountability, there is a long list of benefits associated with tracking mail:

- Timing of follow-up marketing efforts – knowing exactly when mail was delivered allows mail owners to boost response by reinforcing the mail with a subsequent effort – email, webdisplay advertising – even another piece of mail.

- Anticipate and prepare for response – whether bringing in on-call inbound telemarketers or staffing retail locations, mail tracking allows companies to staff accordingly.

- Positioning of merchandise – knowing what mail is being delivered in what regions allows retailers to distribute high value inventory to the correct locations at the optimum moment.

- Identify and resolve USPS delivery issues – mail tracking allows mailers to address delivery issues with the Postal Service while the mail is still in the mailstream.

- Track responses sent through the mail – know when donations and payments are in the mail.

- Document that mail was sent – mail tracking allows mail service providers to document that mail has been received by the Postal Service and can serve as due diligence for mailers requiring proof of mailing to statutory and liability reasons.

Given the substantial investment required to send mail, the relatively small cost of tracking is easily justified.

Defining Informed Visibility

The actual scanning of mail and the distribution of that data is little changed under Informed Visibility. The Intelligent Mail barcode remains the same – there are no elements within the IMb that are specific to IV. There are generally no new scans that occur – the actual handling of mail is unchanged. What does change under IV is the data distribution platform and new tracking "events" are added.

The IV platform operates as the central data distribution platform for all USPS mail tracking. Where tracking data used to flow from multiple platforms – IMb Tracing and PostalOne! – it all now flows through IV. The IV platform is updated and touted as much more secure and stable than the earlier systems. Data pushed to subscribers of IV is sent via Secure FTP. IMb Tracing did not support SFTP.

IV also has an online user interface (UI) that allows mail owners and service providers to manage data delegation, data feeds and more. It is a very robust UI, but not for the faint hearted. It is not intuitive. One needs a pretty in-depth knowledge of MIDs, CRIDs, scan types and more to successfully navigate the UI. Users will include a cast of characters including your IV-BSA, your database manager, your address book manager…and more. It's an alphabet soup of roles – most of which are played by the same person in most organizations. They'll need a big head because it's a lot of hats.

Perhaps the most important change with IV is that the IV system uses business rules to create assumed and logical "events." These are actions the mail took that are not necessarily documented by a physical scan of the piece, but by another action that could be interpreted as an additional action having taken place. Generally these events fall into the categories of assumed events and logical events.

How IV Differs from IMb Tracing – and How It Doesn't

In most respects, the transition from IMb tracking to IV is less dramatic than was the shift from PLANET codes to the IMb. IV certainly provides more data – more scan events for each piece of mail. But, for many mailings the additional data provides very little additional usable information regarding delivery. To compare and contrast some features:

Scans vs. Scan Events. IMb Tracing would create and send a data record when a piece of mail was actually scanned by a piece of mail processing equipment (MPE in postal jargon). IV sends scan data when pieces are scanned, but also creates additional events based on interpreting the data. These are known as "assumed" and "logical" events. More on these later.

Data Provided. Both IMb Tracing and IV provide a scan record every time a scan or scan event occurs. A typical mail piece will get about three IMb Tracing scans as it travels from dock to door. In the IV platform, that same piece may get 5-10 scan events reported, with assumed and logical events added. It will get exactly the same number of actual scans.

Raw vs. Enriched Data. IMb Tracing provides raw tracking data – scan data from actual scans. IV also provides this raw data, provisioned as quickly as possible, and then "enriches" the data by passing it against the relevant eDocs adding tray and container ID's, along with other data found in eDocs. This subsequent data is fed to subscribers after the original raw data has been sent, again increasing the volume of scan data. You will often see the same scan twice – once raw and once enriched.

Latency and Frequency. With IMb Tracing, subscribers were limited to one data feed per hour. IV subscribers can feed data every 15 minutes. Does this matter? Arguably not, as mail generally only gets delivered once a day, but with all of the various types of scan events available it may be helpful. Processing data that frequently does put a burden on the subscriber. With a more modern, more robust platform, IV promises to deliver data more quickly after the mail has been scanned.

Dashboard and Reporting.
IMb Tracing unlike IV has an online user interface that allows subscribers to manage their data feeds and data delegation by themselves. Most IMb Tracing activities were executed by the help desk. It is not a simple interface, so if you are not working in the system on a daily basis it is difficult to operate. You may often end up with the help desk anyway.

Not that this is a bad thing – they are excellent. As far as reporting, IV really has no reporting capabilities. Most mailers will continue to need to use a third-party organization to manage and report IV results in a meaningful way.

Bundle, Tray, and Container Tracking. Perhaps the best publicized aspect of IV is that it includes tracking of containers, bundles, and trays ("handling units" in the vernacular or "HU" if you're really in deep.) This is an important difference, particularly for large mailers managing logistics. Mailers who work through third-party comminglers or drop smaller mailings locally are unlikely to benefit from this feature on IV.

Query Capabilities. IV allows for more than data feeds – mailers can perform queries on specific mailings or mail pieces. These queries are done through the IV gateway and are not easy to execute. The result will be a collection of scan data.

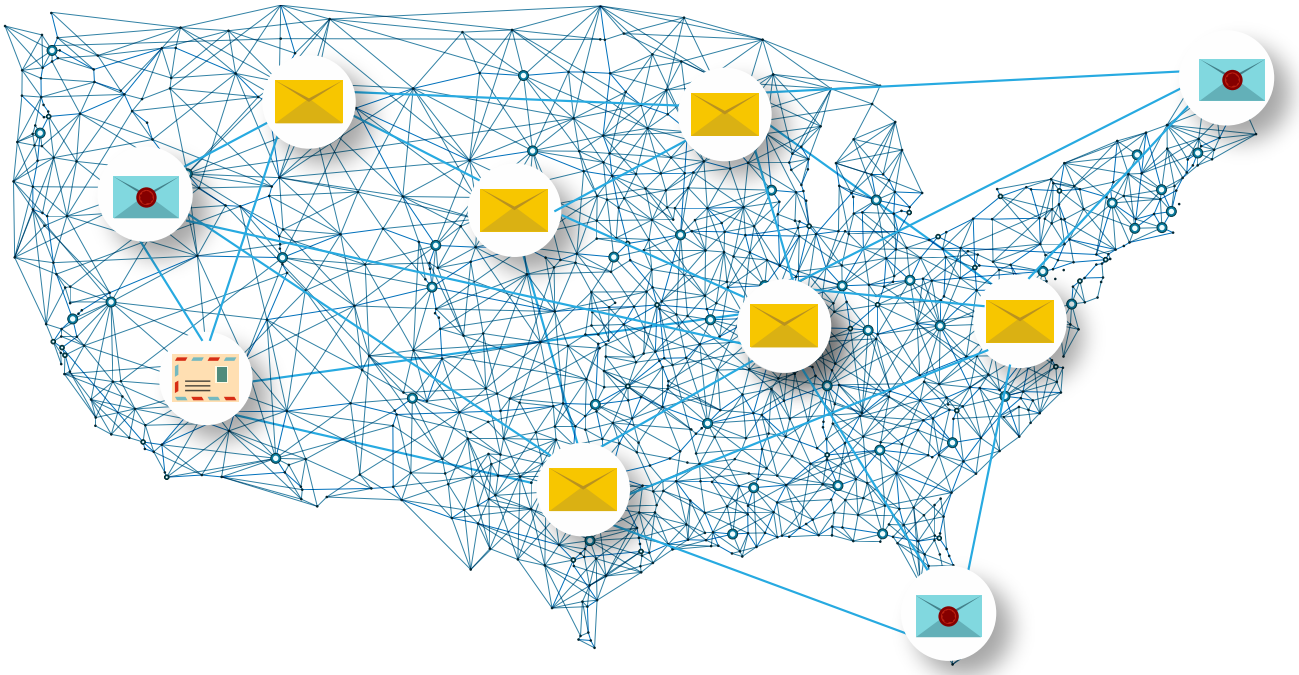
The Bottom Line – IMb Tracing vs. IV:

IV generates a lot more data records than IMb Tracing. Most of these records are assumed or logical events – there are relatively few additional scan points added. The system continues to produce largely raw data feeds that will still require third-party firms, like SnailWorks, for interpretation. It does provide a theoretical time of delivery, which may be interesting for some applications.

Mailers tracking letter-size mail today will see very little difference. IMb tracking scan rates have been excellent and much of the logical assumed data is already being created by mail tracking companies.

Flat-size mail may see a significant improvement in visibility under IV as upstream events have better visibility than piece scans for flats.

As this is written in January 2018, the program is still being rolled out so it is difficult to know how much it will help.



IV Scan Event Types

We can't really just call them "scans" anymore. Now a data record of a piece of mail or a container/bundle/handling unit may be based on a physical scan or an interpreted event. IV provides a variety of scan event types. The three primary types of scan events:

■ Actual Scans. Simple enough.

These are actual physical scans of the relevant mail object. Pieces are scanned as they travel through postal sorting equip-ment. Containers – pallets more often than not – may be scanned as they arrive at postal facilities, as they are loaded or unloaded from trucks, or as they prepare to enter an operation. Bundles and trays are scanned on some pieces of equipment, or as they are prepared for operations. If you see an actual scan, you can be confident that the object scanned is exactly where the scan says it is.

■ Logical Events. Logical events include some interpretation by IV. The best example of a logical event is the "delivered" event. IV can see that a carrier has been given a mail piece for delivery by viewing the final scan where the mail was sequenced for the carrier. A GPS device on the carrier lets the system know when the carrier has entered the ZIP+4 geo-fence of the piece's address, so this creates a logical event. The system knows he has the piece based on an actual scan, so it is logical that it was delivered when he passed the address. This is an "actual logical" event. There may be times when the last actual scan relates to a bundle or container rather than an actual piece scan. The logic is the same as when the carrier passes the address, but because it wasn't an actual piece scan that placed the piece in the carrier's bag, this is considered an "assumed logical" event. The distinction is somewhat esoteric – it doesn't show up this way in the data feed, but it is worth understanding.

■ Assumed Events. Assumed events are tracking events based on tracking an object and assuming the pieces nested to it are there. For example, a pallet of trays may be scanned as it is removed from a truck. IV can identify what mail pieces are on that pallet based on the nesting provided in the eDocs for the mailing, and so may create assumed scans for all of those mail pieces which will appear in data at the piece level. This provides greater visibility into the travel of mail pieces earlier in the process, although it may fall short in terms of proof of mailing. There are a number of events that may generate an assumed scan: the closing of FAST appointments, a truck arrival, and more. Most of these events are scheduled to be enabled in February 2018.

IV Scan Event Types (continued from page 9)

What IV May Scan

■ **Mail pieces.** Like IMb tracing, IV scans mail pieces as they travel through sorting equipment. Typically, for a letter the last scan is seen as the mail is sequenced for the carrier.

■ **Bundles.** Bundles may be scanned as they are sorted in National Distribution Centers (NDC's). The IMb is scanned for the top piece in the bundle, so any other scan events for the other pieces are assumed – either by USPS or the subscriber. Many bundle scans are assumed scans based on the scanning of the container they are traveling in. If a bundle of mail is curtailed – held from delivery to even out carrier loads (load leveling) – the bundle should be scanned.

■ **Trays and Sacks.** Trays and sacks in a mailing carry their own unique barcodes linked to the eDoc for the mailing. They may or may not be physically scanned depending on sortation level. More often, the scan event will be an assumed scan. They may also be scanned when mail is curtailed.

■ **Containers.** Containers are either pallets of mail, or rolling Postal equipment. They will generally receive a physical scan as they are loaded and unloaded from trucks. They may also be scanned as a processing operation is started. Like trays and sacks, containers have their own unique IMbs which link back to the eDoc. Container scans are critical as they often are the source scan for assumed scans for the trays, bundles, and pieces they carry. Container scan events may also be assumed scans based on FAST appointments and truck arrivals.

Business Benefits of IV

We already discussed the general benefits of tracking mail, but IV offers some other important benefits:

■ **Logistics Management.** IV gives large mailers a way of ensuring mail was trucked to destinations on the expected schedule, and to make adjustments when mail is not accounted for.

■ **Earlier Triggering.** By knowing where mail is earlier in the delivery process, coordinated marketing can be better timed to arrive before the mail, allowing more touch points with prospects.

■ **Better Flats Tracking.** Assumed, logical, and bundle scans promise much better visibility into the delivery of flats, traditionally a blind spot for mail tracking. Even high-density and saturation flats should become trackable.

■ **Better Mail Accountability.** When mail does go astray – and it's not being delivered – IV provides new tools for finding the mail. (Tracking back to the container the mail was sent in and find out where it might be, and to get it moving. IV also allows monitoring of when mail entered the mail stream, providing mailers with better insight on how their mail is being handled by all parties.

■ **Mailer Awareness.** The Postal Service is focusing heavily on the importance of visibility – and they are publicizing it. Expect your customers to be interested in participating.

Visibility+™

SnailWorks' IV Solution

SnailWorks has been working closely with the Postal Service on Informed Visibility for months, and as the program evolves we are integrating the advanced capabilities into our system. While the reports you have counted on for years will remain in the same easy-to-use formats, we will be adding enhanced capabilities "under the shell."

- Single piece reports may now include time of day reporting, and a look back at container and tray tracking for that piece.

- Large volume users will be able to upload eDocs and track shipments to postal facilities, identifying when containers arrive.

- Flats tracking rates should be greatly enhanced by tying in assumed scan events and bundle tracking – even carrier route pieces should get delivery data.

- Reply mail will be assigned a unique ID by the Postal Service, allowing response tracking without needing to create unique IMb barcodes.

The Postal Service continues to release updates to the service, and we expect to see continued improvement throughout the year. Best of all, our users don't need to do a thing – just watch your reporting get better and better!

Dave Lewis

Dave Lewis is the Co-Founder and President of SnailWorks. He has been in the direct mail industry for more than 30 years – from a letter carrier just out of college, to a variety of sales, marketing, production and leadership roles in mailing companies.

Dave is a pioneer in the mail tracking business, having founded one of the original tracking companies in 2000. He has been active on a variety of MTAC work groups and user groups, and currently serves as an industry Co-Chair for User Group 4 on Mail Visibility. He served on the Board of Directors for MFSA, and has been awarded the Luke Kaiser Award of Educational Excellence.

Dave splits his time between Fredrick, Maryland and Punta Gorda, Florida.

SnailWorks™ is an integrated direct marketing platform engineered by the same team that made mail tracking easy in 2000. We've leveraged our expertise in mail tracking and web-based interfaces to create a solution that allow direct marketers to increase the effectiveness of direct mail through coordinated channels.

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