

# Mail.dat FAQs

## **What is Mail.dat?**

Mail.dat is the industry standard for presort data. Mail.dat files contain detailed information about a presorted mailing. This industry-standard file set is accepted by the United States Postal Service® (USPS®). Mail.dat is created during the presort process, either by presorting software processing name-and-address lists or by co-mingling equipment sorting already-assembled mailing pieces. No matter how the sortation is performed, the details that make up the mailing are recorded in the Mail.dat file set for that job.

## **Are the actual names and addresses stored in the Mail.dat files?**

No. The only information not included in a Mail.dat file set are the names and addresses of the intended recipients, so confidentiality is assured.

## **What is Mail.dat used for?**

Mail.dat provides the most accurate basis of postal documentation and more. The information in the Mail.dat files is extremely useful in postal document preparation, mail verification and acceptance, electronic data storage, reporting, and transportation planning. The data can be used, for example, to create all of the documentation required by the Postal Service™ for the mailing, including: postage statements, PS-8125 drop-shipping forms, Qualification Reports, Manifest Mailing System Reports, bag and tray tags, as well as pallet placards. Mail.dat facilitates electronic verification and acceptance of the mail, as well as the electronic archival and retrieval of past mailing statements and data. Mail.dat feeds sophisticated reporting to the USPS, letter-shop clients, and internal departments. Mail.dat also enables more efficient transportation planning.

**Why not just use the postal documents generated by the presort?** Mailers use the Mail.dat files generated by the presort as the basis for postal documentation, rather than the documentation generated by presort software or equipment, for many reasons:

- 1. To save on printing and shipping costs and avoid delays.**

Mailers can reduce costs and avoid delays releasing the mail when the presort is performed at a different location than the mail preparation. A service bureau or mail owner may be running the presort software, while a letter-shop or printing company may be preparing and releasing the mail. Instead of printing out all of the hard-copy documentation and shipping it to the mailing facility, the Mail.dat files can be shared electronically, and the documentation can then be printed at the remote site.

- 2. To speed acceptance and improve quality control when changes occur.**

Generating postal documentation from Mail.dat data becomes even more useful when modifications such as changes in piece weights, ad percentages and piece counts to a mailing job are required. Changes can be made to the Mail.dat files without re-running

the presort. These changes can then be easily and accurately reflected in the postal documentation without having to perform manual computations.

For example, in order to use presort software, the weight of the mailing piece must often times be estimated; however, the actual weight of the finished piece may then differ from the estimate. By editing the piece weight in the Mail.dat file before producing the documentation, the accurate weight is captured. Also, in Periodical mailings, the advertising percentage often requires similar, last-minute changes that can alter the final postage calculations. These changed ad percentages may be easily accommodated by editing the Mail.dat files prior to generating postal documentation.

One last example is an unforeseen event on the production floor, such as piece-spoilage or running out of forms, after the presort plan has been completed. In these cases, piece counts may be altered in the Mail.dat file, in accordance with USPS rules and regulations, to accurately account for the changes.

All of these examples clearly show how using Mail.dat can improve your mail quality control and speed acceptance of the mail.

**3. To speed delivery and/or save money via drop-shipping.**

Another common change that is made after presort is the choice of entry point locations to take the mail to. The trays, sacks and/or pallets in a mailing job can be “drop-shipped” to various postal facilities in order to speed delivery and receive additional postal discounts. Mail.dat files contain all of the information necessary to determine which postal facilities the mail is eligible to “drop” at.

From the various eligible entry points, mailers can choose which ones are preferable for their specific circumstances. The decision may involve a desire to speed delivery, to save postage costs or a combination of these factors. The entry points can be edited in the Mail.dat files so that the postal documentation reflects these changes, without re-presorting the name-and-address files.

Larger, more sophisticated mailers may even use the Mail.dat data to optimize the entry point selections automatically by comparing shipping costs to postage savings and selecting only locations where the savings outweigh the cost of shipping.

**4. To benefit from the flexibility to split and merge mailings.**

Mailers often find it necessary to work with only part of a mailing or with multiple mailings simultaneously. For example, a presorted mailing job may include more than a million pieces, but the printing facility may only be capable of producing 300,000 pieces per day, requiring that the job be released over several days. Postage statements and other documentation may be needed for the mail released on each day, but the presort software generates this information only for the entire job. Using the Mail.dat files, the mail preparer can select only that portion that has actually been produced on any given day and produce the required forms.



The Mail.dat files can also be useful when almost the opposite situation occurs. Sometimes, multiple presort jobs are required for a single mailing because multiple versions must be produced in separate production runs. If these are released on the same day using the same permit information it may be beneficial to create consolidated documentation. Consolidating multiple jobs may even involve co-palletization, where trays or sacks from multiple jobs are combined onto common pallets. This further increases the opportunity for drop-shipping eligibility, which can mean additional cost savings for you and your customers.

**5. To save space and money by reducing paper documentation and storage**

The Qualification Reports can be presented to the Postal Service electronically, instead of in hard-copy form because Mail.dat is recognized by the USPS as an approved format for the electronic submission of mailing information via the USPS PostalOne!® program. The PostalOne!® program also includes electronic postage payment for some classes of mail. As the USPS moves ahead with the PostalOne! program, all mail types will be available for electronic payment. This eliminates the need for printed postage statements. PostalOne! also expects to facilitate electronic mail tracking and drop-ship appointment scheduling.

**Can First-Class mailers benefit from using Mail.dat?**

First-Class mailers enjoy reduced paperwork and labor through Mail.dat use. Mail.dat provides a principal way to access the USPS PostalOne! program. While many recognize that Mail.dat offers significant benefits to those people mailing Standard Mail™—particularly drop-ship discounts and the ability to communicate electronically with supply chain partners—the Mail.dat file set also presents those mailing First-Class Mail™ an opportunity to exchange mailing information electronically with the Postal Service. First-Class mailers—both manifest and commingled-presort mailers—can leverage the same advantages for e-documentation and e-payment that exist for Standard and Periodical mailers. (See below for a Summary of Mail.dat Benefits by Class of Mail.)

Several major telecom and utility companies have been using Mail.dat to drive manifest systems to document their First-Class mailings. At least two providers of Multi Line Optical Character Reader (MLOCR) presort machines have demonstrated the ability to create Mail.dat files that could be used to drive a number of applications.

The Mail.dat format is widely available for First-Class mailers in both the manifest and multi-line presort environments. Discuss these options with your software and presort vendors. The benefits of reduced paperwork and labor for electronic documentation and payment, along with the ability to know where your mail truly is in the mail stream, offer substantial value-added services for your customers.



## Summary of Mail.dat Benefits by Class of Mail.

| First-Class                            | Periodicals | Standard Mail | Package Services |   |
|--|-------------|---------------|------------------|---|
| Manifest Mailings                      | •           | •             | •                |   |
| Comingle Presorts                      | •           | •             | •                | • |
| Save Documentation Printing & Shipping | •           | •             | •                | • |
| Reduce Paper & Storage Costs           | •           | •             | •                | • |
| Speed Acceptance                       | •           | •             | •                | • |
| Accommodate Post-Presort Changes       | •           | •             | •                | • |
| Split and/or Merge Mailings            | •           | •             | •                | • |
| Drop-Ship: Speed Delivery              | •           | •             | •                |   |
| Drop-Ship: Save Money                  | •           | •             | •                |   |
| Integrate With PostalOne!              | •           | •             | •                | • |

### How can using Mail.dat improve Surface and Air Visibility?

In the future, Mail.dat will be used to provide greater Surface and Air Visibility. Using Mail.dat files, First-Class mailers may electronically exchange mailing information related to product visibility, including the PLANET Code/4CB, EDL (Enhanced/24 digit tray label), and MTEL (Mail Transport Equipment Label). This information, in some cases enhanced with PostalOne! Transportation Distribution and Routing (D&R) tags will ultimately provide end-to-end container visibility that includes surface and air transportation scans. As the USPS enhances these offerings, Mail.dat stands ready to support their expanded use by mailers.

### Do Manifest Mailers of Standard Mail and Package Services need Mail.dat?

Yes. Mail.dat makes it easier to Manifest Standard Mail and Package Services. Participants in the USPS Manifest Mailing System (MMS) that prepare classes of mail other than First-Class, such as Standard Mail and Package Services, can also benefit from the use of Mail.dat. The Mail.dat standard supports the representation of fixed and floating batch manifests, as well as itemized manifests.

### How do I use Mail.dat data to perform the functions described above?

Use post-presort software for Mail.dat processing.  
Mail.dat provides the information necessary to perform the functions discussed above, but



Mail.dat alone does not perform these functions. Post-presort software is needed to use the Mail.dat information to its fullest extent. Packaged software applications are available from various vendors who specialize in Mail.dat functionality. Proprietary applications developed in-house are also very useful. These applications typically allow you to do the following at minimum:

1. Import Mail.dat files,
2. Validate the information to ensure that it meets the basic industry-standard format specifications.
3. View and edit the files in a more user-friendly environment.

After any alterations are made to the Mail.dat data, the post-presort software generates the required postal documentation to submit with the mailing.

### **Why should presorters generate Mail.dat files?**

As the industry-standard, Mail.dat enables individual mailers and the mailing community, at large, to function more efficiently and cost-effectively.

When presorters generate Mail.dat files for their mailings, they increase the opportunities for mailers and others in the production chain to take advantage of this highly useful information. As this data becomes more widely available, its usage will continue to grow in letter-shops, printing facilities, logistics companies and among mail owners themselves. As greater efficiencies are achieved through the use of Mail.dat data, costs and processing time will be reduced industry wide, to the advantage of all who participate in the mailing community.