UNITED STATES POSTAL SERVICE ®

Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs)

"NCOA^{Link®} vs. ACS™ – Which is Best?" Webinar
May 15, 2014

Background

The **"NCOA^{Link®} vs. ACS™ – Which is Best?"** webinar was presented by USPS Address Management on May 15, 2014. The webinar compared the strengths and benefits of the two major Move Update products. NCOA^{Link} (National Change-of-Address Linkage System) provides change-of-address (COA) information before your mail is produced while the ACS (Address Correction Service) provides either COA or reason for nondelivery information after you mail.

Summary of the questions and answers from the webinar:

1. **Will ACS also catch when an apartment number is left off the mail?**

   ACS will tell you the reason for non-delivery - in this case it is very likely that you would receive a nixie notice that you used an Insufficient Address. If your mailing is missing an apartment number, the carrier may be able to deliver it if he knows the customer, but it is much more likely to be identified as undeliverable.

2. **We are a Mail Service Provider for the collection industry. We offer NCOA and ACS as solutions but have some clients who do this themselves; which puts us at risk of Move Update failure if our clients are not updating their data properly. With the proposed changes to the compliance level from 70% to 99.95% this October, we need some help convincing our clients to use our NCOA and ACS services. We've asked for a letter through our local and regional BSN and BMEU network, but no one is willing to give us a letter because the changes are not set in stone only proposed. We are trying to minimize return mail for all parties and need some help.**

   As soon as the requirements are finalized, the Postal Service will be issuing the new requirements. In the interim, you can provide a copy of this presentation to your customers to show that the Postal Service does strongly recommend using both NCOA^{Link®} and ACS™ to keep their database as up to date as possible. Also, provide your customers with a cost analysis based on what the proposed compliance levels will potentially cost them since you would likely need to pass that additional cost back to them.

3. **Overall, for a large company, which would you recommend; (NCOA^{Link} or ACS)?**

Ideally, the Postal Service would like to see customers using both. NCOA^{Link} and ACS complement one another. NCOA^{Link} is a pre-mailing service but it has very strict matching logic. ACS is a post-mailing product that has more flexibility because the match logic is more flexible and there is a human factor involved. For example, your mailpiece is addressed to someone whose last name is Thorne. On your mailpiece you have Thorn. NCOA^{Link} will not provide the move information for that customer because the names do not match exactly. But with ACS, the flexibility and human factor allow us to see that your Thorn and the customer provided name Thorne are a match when the address is also a match. In addition, ACS will provide you with information about your mail when it is undeliverable for reasons other than a move. You need both NCOA^{Link} and ACS together to optimize your compliance levels and the value of your mailings.

4. **When researching the yellow stickers on various mailpieces, we sometimes get the response from the Post Office that the yellow sticker is not correct. The carrier probably didn't have the correct sticker with them. Based on this, how do we trust what we get back to update the database?**

Delivery personnel do not apply the yellow labels -- it is done by machine. But, both machines and humans make mistakes. You may occasionally receive a mailpiece back where the yellow label does not match your customer reflected on the mailpiece. If you have paid fees for the return of this mailpiece example, you can request a refund of your fee payment. You should not change your customer's name or address in your database but mail to the same address again. The error rate for address update information is very low. You should develop your own criteria for record updates that provide you with a high degree of confidence in the information USPS provides you through NCOA^{Link} and ACS.

5. **Is USPS working on enhancing the turnaround time of ACS notices? Currently I experience 4 to 7 day delay for notices to be received?**

Your mail may have to travel to the delivery office to be identified as undeliverable by the carrier, depending on the shape and the ability to match to a Change of Address record. You may be aware that there has been a consolidation of mail processing facilities and a corresponding change in mail service standards that affects when your mail will be delivered. This also affects the time frame when you can expect your ACS records. ACS records are provided the day after they are generated, so there really is no room for improvement.

6. **If you received wrong mail, do you still need to draw a line with a black marker through the barcode?**

If you are speaking as a customer receiving mail, the answer is no. Please just return it to the carrier with a sticky note letting us know you received the piece in error. We instruct delivery personnel not to mark through the barcode so that mailers can use it to locate their customers if they have the technology to do so using the barcode.

7. **Can you use NCOA^{Link} and an ancillary service endorsement together, verses NCOA^{Link} and ACS? (What are the) Benefits?**

First, generally to receive ACS you must use an Ancillary Service Endorsement (ASE). Please refer to Question 5 above regarding our recommendation that you use both NCOA^{Link} and ACS. If you prefer to receive hardcopy returns or notices at the additional expense, yes, we still recommend using both the pre-mailing and post-mailing products. The benefit to updating prior to mailing is that the piece will go directly to the customer's new address. If you don't update prior to mailing, all the undeliverable pieces will be delayed getting to the new address or returned to you.

8. **I'm not clear who should use pre-mailing NCOA^{Link} and why or who should use post mailing and why?**

The reason we recommend that all mailers use both a pre-mailing NCOA^{Link} and a post-mailing ACS product is to optimize the accuracy of your database. NCOA^{Link} has such tight matching logic that some of your customer's addresses will still be undeliverable as addressed after running NCOA^{Link}. You need ACS to get those corrections where the name and/or address might not quite match exactly what you have in your database versus what the customer provided to the Postal Service reflected in NCOA^{Link}. In addition, ACS will provide you with information about your mail when it is undeliverable for reasons other than a move. The point of the combination of products is that using the pre-mailing product gets more of your mail to the correct address faster, and the post-mailing product demonstrates how much more of your mail was undeliverable as addressed. To make your mailings more valuable, both methods should be used.

9. **Are Processing Acknowledgement Forms required with ACS like they are with NCOA^{Link}?**

No, ACS only requires that you register your MID (Mailer ID) to allow us to provide the records to you.

10. **What safeguards are in place to prevent fraudulent COAs?**

The Postal Service initiated the process we call the Move Validation Letter (MVL) in the early 2000s. Simply put, we mail a letter to a customer who has filed a change of address order to the old address. This letter is specifically intended to prevent potential fraud. When it is delivered, if the customer has not entered a request, they are given instructions on how to report this potential fraud. There are a number of other processes in place to prevent fraud that we do not publish for obvious reasons. Over the last 5 years, of approximately 39 Million annual requests submitted, less than 300 (.0007%) have been sent on to the US Inspection Service from our Change of Address Support department for further investigation each year. The risk is very low that a change-of-address could be used to successfully commit fraud.

11. Why are so many pieces returned with no forwarding address? It seems we are losing touch with more of our constituents than in the past. What are we missing?

Are you performing Move Update processes to keep your list up-to-date? A Change-of-Address request is only valid for forwarding for 12 months, and is returned to sender with the new address for the next 6 months. After that time, if you have not updated your lists, the forwarding information is no longer available to be applied to the mail, so you would receive returns primarily of "Not Deliverable As Addressed, Unable to Forward". It could also be a number of factors ranging from less local knowledge at the delivery level. Historically a delivery person or letter carrier might have been assigned to deliver to the same addresses for 20-30 years. We're seeing many of those people retire. A new delivery person does not have the same knowledge and that same piece of mail will be returned to you as either Attempted Not Known or Undeliverable as Addressed, Unable to Forward. If you want to provide some examples, please scan and email them to lisa.west@usps.gov.

12. We regularly receive temporarily away mail and when we place a stamp on it and re-mail, they are delivered. Why is that?

Most likely, the customer has now returned to their original address and is no longer "Temporarily Away". It could also be the endorsement you're using - If you use "Return Service Requested", you're telling the Postal Service not to forward any of that undeliverable mail. If you are, and you want the temps forwarded, you should change your endorsement to "Temp-Return Service Requested" and the permanent COA-related mail will still be returned to you, but the mail related to a temporary COA will be forwarded.

13. When a female marries, changes her name but does not move, will this mail be delivered?

Yes, the carrier will attempt to deliver the mail. The delivery person's instructions are to deliver it if they can. It is also likely that her husband's mail is already being delivered there, or begins to be forwarded there, which is additional confirmation to the carrier that that name will be accepted there.

14. (Regarding) yellow (labeled) items, while we haven't seen a NCOA^{Link} change or didn't get it on ACS, we suddenly receive something returned with a yellow label. Why wouldn't it have shown up before?

It all depends on what information is being provided on the label. It could be a new COA that was not available when the NCOA^{Link} data you used last was built. If it is a reason for non-delivery, that could be due to a number of different reasons. Each case is different. If you want to provide some examples, please scan and email them to lisa.west@usps.gov.