



January 14, 2011

2011 – The Year of Address Quality!

We can dream, can't we?

ProList, Inc. is an Industry Innovator in data management and direct mail services solutions.

Happy New Year! All in all, 2010 was a pretty good year at ProList, but we think 2011 will be even better, both for us and our clients. And, frankly, when our clients have a good year, so do we – so here's to all of us!

A few weeks ago I posted a [rant on LinkedIn](#), asking my fellow mailing nerds "how do you make your customers care about address quality?" The consensus opinion: Money...and a bunch of other postal nerdy stuff about Merlin tolerances and Move Update Compliance. **Our objective in 2011:** *Make you care about address quality, and do something about it.* We can help!

So, anyway, why should you care about address quality? We did mention money, didn't we? Good address quality can save you lots of it – through lower postage rates, higher response rates, less wasted mail – while poor address quality can cost you a lot through, well, the converse – higher postage rates, lower response rates and more wasted mail. There is really only one compelling thing in favor of poor address quality – it is marginally easier to do nothing than it is to do something. Seriously, that's about it. So I think we can all agree that Good Address Quality is a Good Thing. OK? OK!

There are two kinds of people in the world – those who believe that there are just two kinds of people in the world, and those who know better. The same is true for address quality – there is more than just "good" and "bad." There is always some quality control done to your list, just to get a postal discount - this is minimal address quality. "Best practices" allow you to use a variety of techniques to bring your lists up to industry standard or better. Finally there are extraordinary or "cool" techniques that can take your list the last mile to excellence. Cool is optional – minimal is not. Best practices are really the least you should shoot for. In most cases your efforts will easily pay for themselves.

Now, let's get specific.

NCOA matching is the minimum you can do with a list and still get a postal discount. We'll generally do this as a standard process to qualify your mail for discounts. It involves matching your list against the NCOA (National Change Of Address) database, and updating any reported moves. Woo Hoo! Address Issues Resolved! Well, not so much. You'll get your discount, alright, but NCOA is hardly perfect. If there are old addresses on your list that were changed more than 48 months ago, they are no longer in the NCOA database. Read [last month's issues](#) about a mailer who had more than 100,000 old addresses. If someone didn't report their move to USPS (heaven forefend!) it won't be in the NCOA database. Most business moves won't be there for you B2B types. So you'll meet the requirement for your postage discount, but invariably be sending mail to incorrect addresses. On a well-maintained list, mailed and NCOA matched monthly, you can expect this to be at least 2% of the volume. If you're only doing NCOA it's probably worse. Possibly much worse.

Technically you only need to do NCOA once every 90 days to qualify for your postal discounts, but 90 days is a long time in the mailing world.

"Best Practices" level list management is a combination of NCOA and OneCode ACS (Address Change Service), as well as some active list management. NCOA identifies any changes that have been reported on your list before you create the mailing, and OneCode ACS uses the Intelligent Mail barcode to request electronic information on any mail pieces that are undelivered. Even if the address change is more than 48 months old, or the move was never reported to USPS, you will still at least find out that it was not delivered, and the reason for non-delivery. This information will be in electronic format so it's easy to use to update your lists, and you only pay for the information when there is a change. If you have used the older pre-IMb ACS service, OneCode ACS is a dramatic improvement. Way easier to use and much less expensive. "Active list management" in this context means taking the results you get from these address correction tools and integrating them back into your mailing list. It seems obvious, but a lot of folks don't do it. Whoever is responsible for maintaining your list needs to be apprised of any news you've got about it. There is often a disconnect between the list keeper and the list users in an organization. Make a friend and save yourself some money!

In short, "best practices" is this easy:

- Ask ProList to do NCOA updating for your mailing.
- Make sure you get your updates back from NCOA. Just ask your customer service representative.
- Ask ProList to use OneCode ACS on your mailing.
- Use the change information you get back to update and correct your lists.
- Repeat!

Wow! That was easy!

Once you've started getting less mail back, reducing your mailing costs, and getting better response rates, you're going to like having a good list so much you'll be wondering if there is even more you can do. And there may well be.

Advanced list maintenance techniques can clean up pesky addresses and get update information from other sources. These are optional, but often valuable.

PCOA (Proprietary or Private Change Of Address) is similar to NCOA but it is not a Postal Service product. PCOA is offered by private vendors who gather address change data from a variety of sources that may include magazine subscription organizations, older address change files, and other large list owners. This will often capture address changes that would not turn up otherwise. It is certainly a process worth considering for occasional maintenance. It is not a replacement for NCOA, but an excellent adjunct.

AEC (Address Element Correction) is a Postal Service product that will take your non-ZIP+4 addresses and attempt to standardize them and find a ZIP+4 for them. There is an automated version and AEC II that asks carriers to provide information on the addresses. This is relatively expensive and slow (it can take 60 days) but if an address is the last connection you have to a customer, and the address is wrong, it may be worthwhile.

There are a lot of variables that will help you decide how much TLC your list needs. We really do urge at least the best practices level for any client maintaining their own list. It is a shame how much misaddressed mail is in the mailstream. It's a waste of money and fuels the "j--- mail" crowd. It is a rare case where good list maintenance won't pay for itself.

At ProList, we're mailing list experts. Let us help you make yours the best it can be.

Next Issue: *Why your mailer should be your e-mailer, too!*

Note on trademarks: NCOA, NCOALink, OneCode ACS, and Intelligent Mail are all trademarks owned by the United States Postal Service.

Is your inbound mail IMb compliant? On May 16, 2011 new USPS mailing requirements will be implemented. If you have questions contact your ProList account representative.

To learn more about ProList on our website visit: <http://www.prolist.com>
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