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**POSTAL SERVICE** has been a fixture of American life since Benjamin Franklin was named Postmaster of Philadelphia in 1737. Today the United States Postal Service (USPS) is one of the more dependable American institutions, but technology, a declining economy and competition are placing serious roadblocks on the paved streets of successful national postal operations and profits.

In addition to the challenges that come with running a postal organization in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, the Post Office is also struggling to overcome stereotypes cultivated by negative media coverage and Hollywood writers out for a laugh.

The Frisco Post Office has had its fair share of negative publicity but Wilma Johnson, Frisco's Postmaster, is working hard to displace previous impressions of the city Post Office. "Frisco's Post Office has gotten a bad rap," explains Ms. Johnson. "I work with my carriers and explain the importance of changing our reputation." There's a lot to be done to build momentum and pull up what seems like, to some, is a sinking ship, but Ms. Johnson has the energy and carries a positive attitude to drive change for the better.

**A RURAL ROUTE?**

The interesting thing about mail delivery in Frisco is how the history of the city has impacted the current state of the USPS. Even as little as ten years ago Frisco appeared more rural than suburban, but due to the explosion of growth in the area,

the suburb now looks and feels like a city, while the Post Office is still considered working in a rural area.

For the Post Office this

The Postmaster in Frisco wears many hats and Ms. Johnson is constantly trying to balance the needs of a fast growing city, adding more mailboxes and deliveries, while still staying a "rural" delivery route. Customer complaints of lost, late and misdirected mail all make it to her office and not always in the nicest way. "I think sometimes people forget that mail carriers are actually required to sort the mail, make deliveries in multiple places and are responsible for changes in their route," explains Ms. Johnson. "They are just trying to do their job, not everyone can get their mail before noon." She offers incentives to her employees based on attendance, driving record, minimal complaints and positive attitudes in the workplace.

In addition to handling everything that goes along with having employees literally all over the map, Ms. Johnson has to deal with a continually changing

workplace. Frisco adds new addresses and businesses constantly, making it hard for the Post Office to keep up. City employees now give her office a heads up when new businesses move into the area so Ms. Johnson can provide each business with a packet of information regarding how to handle the various aspects of their mail. "Things flow much better now that we have connections to the businesses



Postmaster Wilma Johnson

photo by Chris Fritchie

## Growing Pains at the Frisco Post Office

By Debbie Vallejo

means carriers are considered "rural carriers," so are more like contract labor as opposed to hourly employees. This impacts how they are paid, eligible benefits, what they wear (no uniforms) and what they drive. Most carriers are required to use their own car making auto insurance higher than average because of the increase in mileage and wear and tear on their vehicles.



Sorting the Frisco mail

photo by Chris Fritchie

coming in and someone at the city who sends us a list of new addresses,” says Ms. Johnson. “This is relatively new and helps a lot.”

#### FIRST CLASS MAIL VS. EMAIL

As a result of the technology boom, first class mail has fallen nationally from 98 billion pieces of mail in 2004 to 96 billion in 2007. Despite the national trend, however, Frisco is again an anomaly with its first class mail actually a major part of the Post Office’s revenue. This is most probably due to the large amount of growth the area has enjoyed for the past decade. That means any decrease in first class stamp sales obviously hurts the bottom line. “By far the biggest challenge for us is the new rate increase,” explains Ms. Johnson. “Anytime there’s a new increase, stamp sales go down.” Since stamp sales are on the decline nationally, but are still a major moneymaker for the Frisco Post Office, a decline in sales is never a good thing.

The USPS response to the stamp increase issue is the “Forever Stamp.” The stamp was created a few years ago to entice customers to buy lots of postage at today’s prices, but with the understanding that the stamps are usable “forever”

without the hassle of having to add on that pesky one cent while the rest of the population is getting rid of yesterday’s stamp. All unused postage issued since 1861 or later is still valid. The current stamp is valued at 42 cents due to the rate increase enacted on May 12<sup>th</sup>.

If a letter is mailed from Frisco to a person living in Frisco, it will still go to Coppell and then be re-distributed to the local facility.

So why not just sell the Forever Stamp and do away with everything else? “Customers want variety,” explains Ms. Johnson. “There are variables involved with mail weight, so we need different denominations, but people also like the themes and seasonal stamps that come out.”

#### THE INS AND OUTS

Every piece of mail inbound to Frisco goes first to a sorting and distribution center in Coppell and then is sorted by route and transported to the general Post Office on Stonebrook Parkway. Each mail carrier picks up the mail on his/her route and sorts it into deliverable sections. Once sorted, the carrier takes bins full of mail and delivers each piece to the appropriate address. If a letter is mailed from Frisco to a person living in Frisco, it will still go to Coppell and then be re-distributed to the local facility.

Each carrier understands the little nuisances of his or her route; the house numbers that are difficult to read, the various names in residence, forwarded mail, etc. When mail is delivered, any outgoing mail is picked up and taken back to the Post Office where it is put on a truck and sent back to Coppell for sorting and distribution. “I talk to my carriers about being proactive,” explains Ms. Johnson. “Be dependable, make your deliveries in a timely fashion and if there’s a problem handle it calmly.”

Carriers feel a certain level of frustration when customers are not especially helpful to postal workers trying to deliver the mail. “One of the biggest complaints I

hear from mail carriers is the inability to read a house number,” explains Ms. Johnson. “Making sure the house number is clearly legible and easy to read really helps out a mail carrier.” Parked vehicles blocking mailboxes is another hindrance to speedy service. “Don’t park in front of a mailbox,” says Ms. Johnson. “You’ll still get your mail, but you’ll also get a note from the carrier.” When a car is parked consistently in front of the same box a supervisor will call the resident.

### COMPETITION

The statutory mail monopoly only applies to first class items, so the USPS often finds itself losing money to competitors offering more accessible services and better rates. For example, Post Office boxes were another way USPS made some money and held on to its share of the market. Competitors honed in on P.O. Box revenue until USPS was forced to make some changes. “We had to take the P.O. Box worldwide to compete with UPS stores who were all over the place,” says Ms. Johnson.

Contract postal units (CPUs) are another way USPS is competing with other stores. CPUs are operated by a contractor and offer services to the community at other locations, usually in a store or business. In Frisco there is a CPU located in Frisco Square, one at the Frisco Storage Center on Frisco Street, and one at Preston Wade Storage on Wade Boulevard. There is also another Post Office at Teel Village Finance on Teel Parkway. Creating other smaller locations allows USPS to compete more significantly with other vendors such as UPS.

### CHANGING A REPUTATION

Highly publicized shootings in the 1990s led to a public misconception of USPS employees that seems to continue today. The impact of those disgruntled employees lives on in slang terminology such as “going postal,” and has even made its way into television with episodes of



*Seinfeld* where a disgruntled Newman displays rather bizarre behavior and, in fact, relishes the stereotype. “Our employees work hard at making sure the mail runs smoothly and is delivered to the right place,” says Ms. Johnson. “They work for two or three years on a route before they can take a test and be considered a ‘regular.’” Impressions of the local Post Office are definitely influenced by a national reputation.

Despite their best efforts, mistakes do happen and some customers become upset when mail is delivered late or to the wrong address. Ms. Johnson feels the Frisco Post Office has received a bit of a “bad rap” over the years and is now trying to correct misunderstandings and urges her employees to work hard at changing stereotypes. “We regret any mis-delivery issues,” explains Ms. Johnson. There is a chain of command for residents to follow if there is a consistent problem with mail delivery. “Any individual with a complaint can come talk to a supervisor. If the problem is not handled to the person’s satisfaction, then they can make an appointment to speak with me,” says

Ms. Johnson.

Even with tackling the various local issues, there is only so much a Postmaster can do. Labor is unionized placing strict limits on how and when Ms. Johnson can engage her employees, and policies are sent from the top down and then implemented at the local level. Ms. Johnson does motivate her crew with incentives that are awarded according to work ethic, timely delivery, minimal complaints and good attendance. Those incentives are in her hands and allow her to motivate her employees at the local level.

Congress has passed legislation allowing for annual rate increases. The USPS plans to cut overtime and use more seasonal help and less full-time staff to decrease costs. For the time being, the Post Office is working its way out of a deficit. Forward thinking and technological advances will help maintain a future of profit and insure reliability. Ms. Johnson is doing her best to make sure the Frisco Post Office passes muster.

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*Debbie Vallejo is a freelance writer living in Frisco.*