

Economy

\$3.2 billion
MOST RECENT QUARTERLY LOSS

\$14.1 billion
PROJECTED LOSSES FOR 2012

\$21 billion
PROJECTED ANNUAL LOSSES BY 2016 WITHOUT GOVERNMENT ACTION

Reinventing the Post Office. Six surprising ways to serve a nation with less snail mail

Plummeting mail volume. Bad press. Losses topping \$3.2 billion in a single quarter. If the U.S. Postal Service is going to survive, let alone thrive, in the age of digital communication, “it has to take innovation seriously,” says Steve Hutkins, a professor at New York University and founder of SaveThePostOffice.com. That means thinking beyond the solutions being debated in Congress—shuttering offices, cutting jobs, consolidating mail centers—and fundamentally reshaping its business. But what could a 21st century post office actually *do*? TIME gathered outside-the-mailbox ideas from economists, bloggers, overseas postal workers and more. —JOSH SANBURN

1

SELL MARKETING SOLUTIONS

To supplement its new Every Door Direct Mail program, which allows small businesses to target specific mail routes, the Postal Service could help them create promotional materials. It could also partner with a tech company to offer e-marketing, says Kenneth Wisnefski, founder of online-marketing firm WebiMax.

2

EXPAND RETAIL PRODUCT LINE

Forget stamps and envelopes. The post office could sell a range of products from cell phones to insurance to computers. The U.K.'s post office sells all these items and more.

3

OFFER BASIC FINANCIAL SERVICES

In Europe, postal services offer checking accounts, credit cards and mortgages—a great way to earn extra money. And it's not unprecedented in the U.S.: from 1911 to '67, the USPS let people buy certificates of deposit while earning 2% interest.

4

PROVIDE RURAL INTERNET ACCESS

Some 4,000 rural post offices are connected to the Internet via satellites, meaning the USPS has one of the largest satellite networks in the country. It could sell Web access to remote communities, suggests Hutkins. Post offices also could host pay-as-you-go Internet cafés.

5

EMBRACE DIGITAL MAIL

Postal services in Australia and Germany can deliver physical letters via secure e-mail account (read: no spam!) and vice versa. State-side, the Government Accountability Office has already suggested that the USPS follow suit.

6

TURN POSTAL TRUCKS INTO ROVING LABS

The post office's 213,881 mail trucks traverse the entire country, meaning they could gather vital information about weather patterns and air-pollution levels, suggests Michael Ravnitzky of the Postal Regulatory Commission. The USPS could even lease truck space to other federal agencies and eventually to businesses like Google Maps.

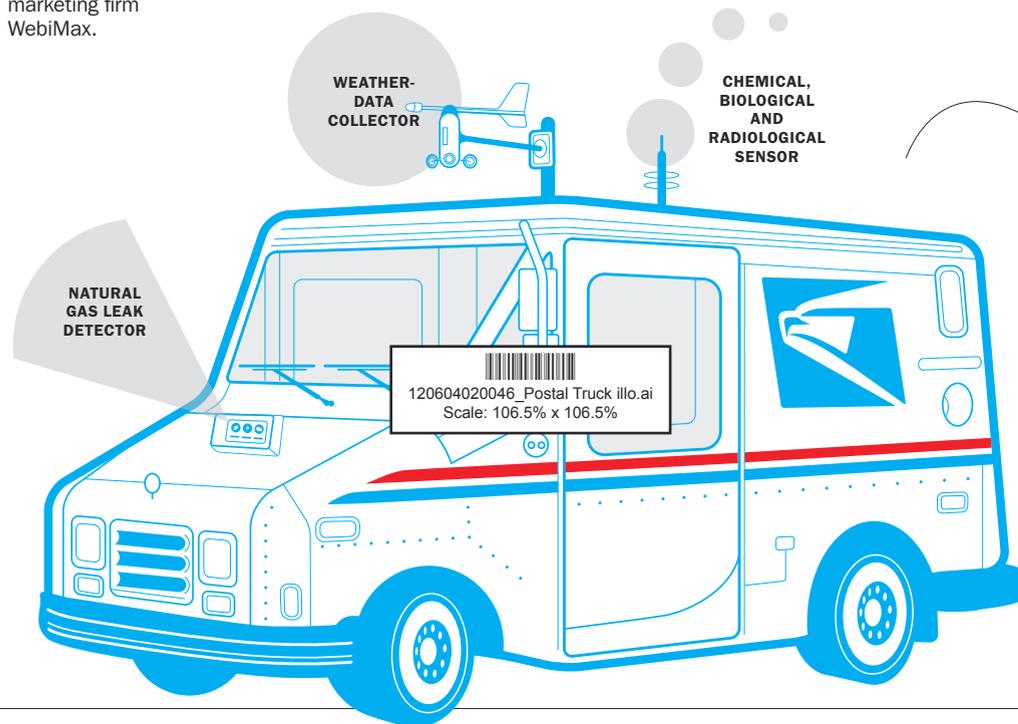


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