



Getting Smart

USPS has revamped its approach to parcel lockers, with hundreds now on the horizon.

For customers, USPS Smart Lockers are a free, secure and convenient way to safeguard packages. For business shippers of all sizes, a cost-effective, transparent approach to foiling porch pirates.

And for the Postal Service, they're the latest retail innovation under the Delivering for America plan, designed to align the organization to a transformed postal landscape. Deploying Smart Locker technologies will allow customers to pick up packages at their convenience, as most lockers are located in 24/7 lobbies, which creates a great customer experience in more modern Post Offices.

What began as a pilot project in 2021 at 10 retail sites in Northern Virginia received such a positive response that, by June of this year, the organization expects to have 517 of the electronic, keyless receptacles installed in nine states, including 22 sorting and delivery centers — with plans for many more in the works.

“I really feel the timing is now right for newer and more capable parcel lockers,” said Paul Bernicchi, manager of innovative technology implementation for USPS. He’s referring to the organization’s first attempt at parcel lockers years ago. The project was before its time and did not catch on.

Since then, USPS has developed a plan to make it easy and convenient to use Smart Lockers. The lessons learned from that original foray were taken into consideration for this purchase. The Smart Locker program is a strategic initiative that brings all the organization’s expertise to bear.

“This time it’s a lot more comprehensive,” said Armando Lopez, USPS director of product technology innovation.

The Postal Service is also reframing the project from one designed to answer an operational need — how to reduce the number of times a package is handled during delivery attempts — to one that puts market strategy first and foremost.

How USPS Smart Lockers work

Customers are sent a six-digit access code and a QR code via email. They have five days to pick up their parcel at the locker site — a Post Office or sorting and delivery center lobby — using the QR code. Three reminder emails are sent; after five days, a final email alerts the customer to the code's expiration and explains that the package must now be picked up at the retail window.

Currently, the lockers support direct-to-locker deliveries, redeliveries and oversized PO Box packages. Soon they will support returns, as well.

said of her older customers. “Well, they all do now. That’s why we have these parcels!” she joked.

Digital natives and those comfortable with basic technology should have no problem, but even so, Bernicchi said the team is working on a series of enhancements that should make the user interface even simpler.

They want the front end of the process to be easy, too. Training sessions for employees are held regularly, and an internal page on Blue, the Postal Service employee intranet site, contains a trove of information on handling, depositing and retrieving parcels.



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A game changer

As the rollout continues, the Sales and Marketing teams will be letting traditional retailers and e-commerce merchants know how to take advantage of Smart Lockers. The Postal Service is also making Smart Lockers available on its own software platforms, such as Retail Systems Software and Click-N-Ship, to optimize the offering.

Bernicchi is sanguine that the time has come for USPS Smart Lockers.

They will be another “game changer” for the organization, and even “monumental,” in his view.

Or as Bryant, the postmaster from Sequim, simply put it: “It’s one of the better ideas I think we’ve had.”

Cindy Bryant, postmaster for Sequim, WA, was sold from Day 1: “I love ’em. I’ve already asked for more.”

For her, the security provided to customers and the substantial time savings for retail associates are the biggest benefits.

Package-handling time in her office has been whittled from 2-3 hours a day to about 45 minutes — “so much quicker,” she said enthusiastically — and the new process means retail associates spend less time retrieving packages, and more time at the counter.

Becky Brockoff, officer in charge at the Post Office in Lester Prairie, MN, said they proved to be a godsend during peak. “We have a large PO Box section and they’ve come in very handy” — and saved those customers from waiting in line to claim their parcels.

The biggest hurdle both postmasters see is a slight learning curve for the tech-wary.

Bryant, who said her customer base skews older, does not think it will take long. “When COVID hit, nobody knew how to use their computers or smartphones,” she

