

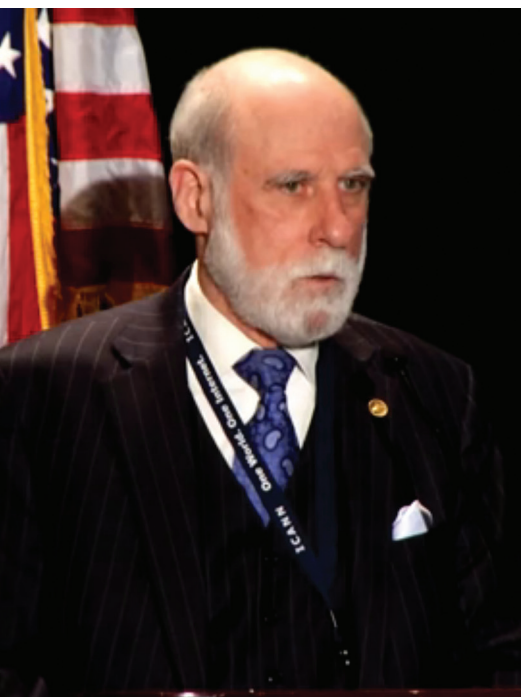
Stakeholders looked toward the future at third PostalVision 2020 conference

PostalVision 2020/3.0 Conference

“Positioning
America
for the **New Millenium**”

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April 23-24 | L'Enfant Plaza Hotel | Washington, DC



Vint Cerf, a vice president and “chief Internet evangelist” for Google and a co-founder of the Internet kicked off the conference.

Why not give people the convenience of writing messages to loved ones on a computer or smart phone, combined with the personal touch of the mail, with a website and phone app that prints and mails your messages?

How about using the Postal Service’s built-in privacy and security controls to complement the Internet at its weakest point, giving customers an electronic communication path they can trust?

Those were a few of the ideas expressed when scores of entrepreneurs, academics, business leaders and government officials, along with NALC President Fredric Rolando, gathered at the L’Enfant Plaza Hotel in Washington, DC, last month for the third annual “PostalVision 2020” conference on the future of the Postal Service.

While the participants brought exciting ideas for new business ventures, they also talked about the reforms needed to give USPS the breathing room to develop a strategy for future growth. President Rolando focused participants’ attention on how the Postal Service’s financial problems are greatly misunderstood.

“I think it’s important to change the conversation about the Postal Service ‘losing \$16 billion a year,’ ” Rolando said. He told the audience that the pre-funding of future retiree health care benefits, which is required of no other agency or private business, accounts for 80 percent of the reported losses and greatly overstates the scope of the problem.

“This is the richest ‘broke’ company I’ve ever heard of,” Rolando said, pointing to the billions in cash the Postal Service has been forced to park in pre-funding and the surpluses in federal pension funds.

“There are things that need to be fixed that have nothing to do with delivering the mail,” such as pre-funding

and the postal governance structure, Rolando said. Once Congress acts to solve those problems, he said, the future is wide open.

“The Postal Service has a great future,” he said. “The future of e-commerce is unlimited.”

One of the nation’s leading Internet pioneers—a man who helped introduce e-mail to the world—told the audience that the Postal Service still serves an essential role.

“It’s a national infrastructure like schools, public roads, water supply, electricity, and telecommunications,” said Vint Cerf, a vice president and “chief Internet evangelist” for Google and a co-founder of the Internet. “I think it’s utterly incumbent on all of us to figure out how to retain this very important infrastructure.” He said the USPS provides a service that is “essential to a democratic society.” (For more about Cerf’s views, see the August 2011 issue of *The Postal Record*.)

There is a vast untapped market for new services that the Postal Service is uniquely positioned to provide, he said, if Congress allows it. “This is not the staid and uncreative operation that it’s been made out to be,” Cerf said. “It has been hampered by a bunch of rules.” Congress should give the USPS more room to innovate, he said, but “they are acting like a bunch of 6-year-olds right now.”

Some entrepreneurs, from the United States and beyond, who are pushing ahead with innovative ways for using the postal system in a digital world, also presented their ideas at the PostalVision conference.

Liam Church, CEO of Escher Group, a London-based firm that helps postal and other customers communicate in new ways, discussed how the government of Ireland rejected an Internet-only system for gathering input on reviewing the country’s constitution. Instead, it created a hybrid postal-Internet system to take

advantage of the best of both modes of communication.

Another London business leader, Jonathon Grubin, talked about SoPost—his Internet startup company that will let people use their social media presence as their physical address. By allowing people to get deliveries by providing the shipper only a Facebook, Twitter or other account—without the need to reveal their address—SoPost will protect privacy, assure identity and keep physical addresses up to date when a person moves.

Drew Bartkiewicz, co-founder of lettrs.com, explained his vision for an entirely new way to send mail. Through the company's website (lettrs.com) or its phone app, a new generation can bridge the gap with the Postal Service by composing messages that the company will print and mail. It combines the convenience of the Internet with the personal appeal and permanence of a letter.

"People want meaningful communication," he said. "What's most personal is often the most universal." Bartkiewicz is relying on his entire family, including his son, Blake—a co-founder of the company—to help make his product appeal to the digital generation.

Ideas like lettrs.com that make using a product fun, rather than just useful, are the kind the Postal Service and its business partners should strive for, said Farah Abdallah, an innovation expert and product manager for eBay.

"Design dreams, not products," she advised. Product and service design matters much more to consumers than most businesses realize. To apply her concept, Abdallah imagined a reinvented mailbox—a "smart mailbox" that would link the Internet to the mail and give customers the same "fun" factor they get with well-designed websites and mobile apps.

There was no shortage of ideas in the room, but were postal managers

who work across the street at USPS Headquarters listening?

Some were. The Postal Service's newly appointed vice president for secure digital solutions, Randy Miskanic, told the conference how he wants to leverage a key advantage of the Postal Service—security and trust—to become an Internet player and integrate traditional and digital delivery.

Building on his experience in the Postal Inspection Service, Miskanic wants to establish an electronic system that consumers and businesses can rely on to assure their communications and financial transactions are secure and private, and that can verify the identities of each party.

With the nation's most trusted federal employees—letter carriers—and its own in-house law enforcement division, the Postal Service is unmatched for that job, he said. "Security, privacy and trust are in our DNA." The range of products could include an electronic postmark that verifies the identification of the sender and security of the message, with the same force of law behind that guarantee that physical mail and mailboxes enjoy.

With products like these, Miskanic said, the Postal Service can even compete with Internet services that businesses and consumers get for no charge. "Is free really the best way?" he asked, since fraud and online theft cost money, too. (As if to support Miskanic's point, the PostalVision website was shut down by a computer virus the day after the conference.)

USPS Inspector General David Williams was there, taking it all in and explaining his own ongoing efforts to push the Postal Service to innovate. Williams has been an aggressive idea man, collecting proposals, commissioning studies and exploring suggestions from USPS, the mail community and the public.

But even if postal managers get on board with efforts to modernize the



Top: NALC President Fredric Rolando clarified the Postal Service's true financial problems for the attendees.

Above: USPS Inspector General David Williams was one of the many speakers who speculated about how innovation could shape the future of the Postal Service.

Postal Service to compete in the digital world, many speakers reminded the audience that Congress must free the agency to make those plans a reality.

NALC is working vigorously to assure that Congress passes a postal reform bill that addresses the root causes of the financial problems at the Postal Service and positions it to thrive and grow so that entrepreneurs can create new ways to use the network, and so letter carriers can continue to do what we do best—deliver the last mile. **PR**