

## Online services deliver mail without the paper

For a monthly fee, customers can view their letters, bills and catalogs on their computers.

By Alana Semuels

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The post office doesn't deliver mail to Steven Stark's Santa Maria home anymore.

It's not that Stark, the 36-year-old owner of an Internet company, is unpopular. He just decided that he'd rather deal with all of his correspondence online.

Millions of Americans receive online versions of their bills and bank statements. But Stark is one of tens of thousands who have decided they don't need any physical mail, be it love letters or advertising come-ons.

Instead of plodding down to the mailbox, they open their Web browsers. Rather than stuff file cabinets with paper, they keep their mail online.

Analysts say it's too soon to tell whether digital mail is the next big thing, and skeptics, including the U.S. Postal Service, abound. Still, as consumers become more tied to the digital world, Web-based snail mail services are expanding.

Beginning April 27, Swiss Post, Switzerland's national postal operator, will use the technology developed by Earth Class Mail of Seattle, the same company Stark uses, to deliver regular mail online in six European countries.

"There is a real desire for such a service," said Benoit Stroelin, head of finance at Swiss Post Solutions.

Scanning correspondence and putting it online is the "middle step" in a march toward the future of all-digital delivery, Stroelin said. Early adopters such as Stark give a glimpse into how that might look.

Earth Class Mail assigned him a post office box in Los Angeles. For \$11.95 a month, the company opens all of his mail -- letters, bills, catalogs and all -- then scans and uploads it to the Web so he can read his correspondence online.

Stark doesn't have to give the post office his new address every time he moves. He can go on vacation to Palm Springs or Las Vegas and not miss any important mail. By checking a box on his computer screen, Stark can tell the company to shred, recycle or forward the mail to him. He can have the company send packages to his house or pick them up at the nearest Earth Class Mail Center.

"It's just more convenient," he said.

Convenience has its cost. The \$11.95 fee includes 50 pages scanned a month and unlimited recycling and shredding. Each extra page scanned costs 25 cents. Like a cellphone plan, customers can pay more to have higher limits.

Members are assigned either a post office box or a generic mailing address in Beaverton, Ore., where Earth Class Mail has a sorting facility. Customers who want a premium address, even a false one, can pay extra. Manhattan costs \$29.95, and West Hollywood or San Francisco cost \$23.95.

For the average American, digital mail won't take over any time soon.

Security is obviously a big concern. Worries about mail fraud and identity theft may slow the shift. Although having someone else open your mail reduces the chances you'll get anthrax poisoning, it also "opens up another way that the customers' information can be compromised," said Stan Stahl, president of information security firm Citadel Information Group.

Earth Class Mail, which has 115 employees, tries to limit risk. Employees need key cards to enter the mail rooms. They wear pocketless jumpsuits to make it tougher for them to remove correspondence, and are monitored by security cameras as they sort and scan the mail.

But there are outside risks, Stahl said. Computer hackers could break into the database of scanned mail if the network isn't secure enough, he said, and if mail becomes completely digital, the number of viruses passed by that medium probably will increase.

While picking up mail at the Los Feliz post office branch recently, Gemmandy Priutsky, a federal housing official, said he'd never want his mail delivered online. His identity was stolen after someone pilfered mail from his home last year, so now he visits his post office box six days a week.

"There are too many fraudulent activities online," he said.

Most older people are more comfortable using snail mail to pay their bills and send goods, and many younger people skip mail entirely and just use the Internet, said Michael Gartenberg, vice president of strategy and analysis for Interpret, a media and technology research firm.

"It will probably take a good deal of this generation to die off before we actually make that transition," Gartenberg said.

The U.S. Postal Service has experimented over the last decade with offering digital versions of some of its core services, but "people weren't comfortable," agency

spokeswoman Susan Brennan said. Many services were discontinued by 2003, although the post office still offers a Web service that allows users to design cards, which it will print out and send.

"First-class mail is the most secure way to communicate in this country," Brennan said.

That hasn't stopped companies such as Zumbox Inc. from trying to push the digital envelope.

The Westlake Village company created an online mailbox for every residential address in the country. Companies can send marketing material, bills and other mail digitally to the Zumbox account affiliated with the street address. Zumbox says the system adds convenience because customers can see all their correspondence through one Web account.

Zumbox is free for users, and advertisers pay 5 cents per address for a piece of sent mail. Businesses can target neighborhoods with digitally delivered mail without spending money on postage, Zumbox founder Glen Ward said. The company signed a deal last week to deliver newsletters and other government communication such as water bills from the Village of New Lenox, Ill., in digital form to its citizens' Zumbox accounts.

"We are convinced it's the way to go," New Lenox Mayor Tim Baldermann said. "It's good for the environment, and it's good for our taxpayers."

Though households currently get both regular mail and Zumbox mail, Baldermann said the town could save \$120,000 a year in printing and mailing costs if everyone switched.

Though digital mail services aren't going mainstream quickly, they've attracted fervent users.

Ryan Flegal, a West Hollywood real estate broker, signed up for an Earth Class Mail account last fall so he could travel and still access his regular mail. He finds it much easier to keep track of his mail and bills online.

"I don't particularly enjoy opening mail," he said. "I do a lot better job of organizing things electronically."