

IBM CUSTOMER FACING SOLUTIONS

United States Postal Service

Influential praise for innovative self-service kiosk solution



Challenge

The United States Postal Service (USPS) was looking to reduce wait times and increase efficiency at post offices across the country. The USPS serves over seven million customers each day, and because that population has been growing faster than the USPS infrastructure to serve them, there is a great need for self-service technologies. They wanted kiosks to provide the most common customer transactions, 24 hours a day, seven days a week with minimal maintenance. The USPS came to IBM to meet that need.

Solution

In 1998, IBM developed and deployed 16 prototype Automated Postal Center (APC) models for a market test period that focused on customer acceptance of the kiosks rather than cost savings for the USPS. These early APCs featured custom-built software designed and developed by IBM. The market test was extremely successful, and based on this success and public demand, the USPS decided to roll out 2,500 APCs in 2004 to their largest post offices across all 50 states.

Our team, in tandem with the USPS team, based the kiosk software on USPS-supplied screen flows which were themselves based upon market testing and customer service functionality. The APC was engineered with proven components and serviceability features that allow USPS retail associates to cost-effectively maintain the kiosks. The architecture allows for system-wide remote software and data updates, as well as remote monitoring and reporting functions for maintenance purposes, and an infrastructure that can scale up to over 20,000 APCs.

Each APC features a touch screen, credit/debit card reader, weigh scale, and postage printers/dispensers to provide the required transactions to most customers. To make these transactions accessible to all customers, the APC's include a headset jack, IBM ViaVoice text-to-speech voice output, and a 4-button EZ Access® keypad to implement the defacto accessibility interface endorsed by the Trace Research Center. All APCs conform to the standards of the ADA (Americans with Disabilities Act) and Section 508 of the Rehabilitation Act for accessibility.

Results

Our team exceeded USPS expectations by creating a solution that had broad customer acceptance, met revenue objectives months ahead of schedule, improved customer access (most kiosks are available 24/7), and improved customer service. Initial survey results from the USPS showed that 98% of customers found the APC easy to use and would use it again. Based on the APCs' success, the USPS is looking to expand the program into non-postal locations, such as supermarkets, retail stores, and other businesses with high-traffic. To top it off, in 2004 we won Kiosk magazine's prestigious "Best Retail Kiosk Application" award. In Kiosk magazine's own words, "These terminals could do for the Post Office what ATMs did for the banking industry."