

Intelligent Mail Barcode 101

*The Benefits, Requirements,
and How It Works.*



What is the Intelligent Mail Barcode?

The Intelligent Mail Barcode, or IMB, is a barcode used by the United States Postal Service (USPS) to sort and track pieces of mail that travel through the postal delivery system. An example of the IMB on an envelope is illustrated in Figure 1. This specific tool was formerly called the 4-state customer barcode, because each bar in the code image can consist of one of four states, as shown in Figure 2. The data contained in the IMB includes the data types from the POSTNET and PLANET Code barcodes, plus additional information. The IMB allows for tracking of individual mail pieces and provides more accurate information about mailings. While the existing POSTNET barcode can be manually decoded, an algorithm is required to encode and decode IMB data.



Figure 1. Example of IMB on a first-class mail envelope.

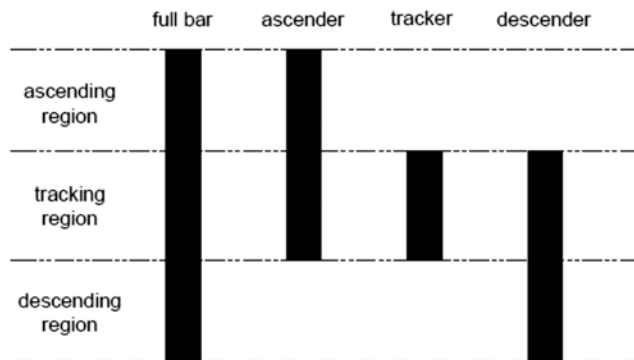


Figure 2. The four bar states of the IMB.

IMB BENEFITS

- **Greater Data Capacity**
- **More Space for Copy or Graphics**
- **Improved Delivery**
- **Track Your Mail**

Contents of the IMB

Each IMB contains a wealth of information about the piece of mail it's printed on. This includes:

- A barcode identifier assigned by USPS that encodes pre-sort information (2 digits)
- A Service Type Identifier that indicates the services applied to the mail piece, including mail class or service program (3 digits)
- A Customer Identifier that is specific to the mailer (6 or 9 digits)
- A Serial Number assigned by the mailer to identify the specific piece of mail (6 or 9 digits)
- The Delivery Point ZIP Code (0, 5, 9, or 11 digits)

Basic vs. Full Service

Mailers are able to choose from two levels of IMB services: basic or full service. Basic service does not require unique identifiers on every piece of mail. For full service, a unique IMB must be printed on each mail piece, and each tray label, sack label and container label also has to contain a unique IMB. Submission of postage statements has to be completed electronically. However, mailers who choose the full service option are eligible for postage discounts, "start the clock" services, and address correction services at no cost.¹

To take advantage of the tracking portion of the IMB, mailers have to be enrolled in the CONFIRM service. Once a mail piece has been scanned by the USPS during sorting, information on that piece is added to the CONFIRM database.

What are the Benefits of the IMB?

The IMB provides mailers with a variety of benefits:

- The IMB has a greater data capacity than previous bar codes, so that more information can be included in a smaller space. It also eliminates the need for multiple bar codes to accommodate different USPS programs, so you have more space available on your mailing for graphics or other information. The use of one bar code allows for greater scanning accuracy and improved delivery.

¹ http://www.pb.com/cgi-bin/pb.dll/jsp/GenericEditorial.do?editorial_id=ed_IMB_FullvsBasic&lang=en&country=US

- The IMB allows for each individual mail piece to be uniquely identified and tracked. This will give you more accurate information about your mailings as a whole and allow you to quickly follow up on non-deliverable pieces.
- Mailers who choose the full-service option have access to free “start the clock” and address correction services to improve delivery and reduce costs.
- By using IMBs, mailers will have greater insight into the USPS operations and can keep accountability. Using the same technology, the USPS can determine which mailers are not preparing their mail based on USPS requirements.

The IMB is currently an option for mailers to use to improve their mail tracking. The USPS has intended for the IMB to become a requirement for their automation mailing and other service programs, but as of the date of this writing, there is no official date at which the IMB will become required.

What are the Requirements of the IMB?

Mailers can use the IMB on letters, flat mail pieces, and periodicals when participating in specific USPS service programs. Table 1 below outlines the types of mail pieces and service programs where the IMB can be used.

Table 1. USPS Programs that Support IMB.

	Confirm Service	OneCode ACS	Business Mail Entry Units (BMEU)
Letters	✓	✓	✓
Flat Mailers	✓	✓	✓
Periodicals	✓	✓	

One of the benefits of using the IMB is that mailers can qualify for automation postage prices as long as all other requirements for automation are met. This benefit has been in place since 2007. To qualify for automation rates, the IMB must include:

- A proper routing ZIP Code
- A valid Mailer ID
- An applicable value for Service Type ID, such as: 700 for first class mail, 702 for standard mail, 704 for periodicals, or 706 for bound printed matter. There are additional Service Type IDs but these are the most commonly used codes.



How do I Create and Use an IMB on my Mailing?

Before you can create an IMB for your mailings, you have to have a Mailer ID issued by the USPS. If you already participate in USPS programs for your mailings, you likely already have a Mailer ID. However, if you need to apply for a Mailer ID, you can do so through the USPS web site.² Also, all mailers who wish to use IMBs must also have a Customer Registration ID. This ID associates a mailer with a specific location, something important for mailers who have multiple facilities.

The USPS offers tools for mailers to translate their tracking information into an IMB that can be printed onto their mail pieces. Depending on the scope of your mailing process, you can use an online tool to encode your IMB³, download encoder software and approved fonts⁴, or add code into your addressing process to automatically generate IMBs for your mailings. The fonts and graphics used in the IMB are different than those used in previous barcodes, so it is important that you have the up to date tools to generate your IMBs.

Alternatively, your mail vendor should be able to handle the IMB for you and, in this case, you would use their Mailer ID and Customer Registration ID. They would also generate the IMBs for you and image them onto your direct mail.

What are the IMB Dimensional Requirements?

The IMB can be placed above (as shown previously in Figure 1) or below the address block on the mailer, and left justified with the address text. In addition, the IMB can be placed in the barcode clear zone on the lower right of an envelope. On flat mailers, the IMB can be placed anywhere on the same side as the address as long as it is at least 0.125" away from the edge of the mailer. The total width of the IMB must be between 2.667" and 3.225". This width includes all 65 characters of the IMB.

There is some flexibility in the width and height of the individual bars of the IMB, as well as skew and rotation of the IMB to accommodate printing methods and processing errors. These tolerances are illustrated in Figure 3.

² <https://ribbs.usps.gov/index.cfm?page=intellmailmailidapp>

³ <http://ribbs.usps.gov/onecodesolution/Default.aspx>

⁴ <https://ribbs.usps.gov/index.cfm?page=intellmailmailpieces>

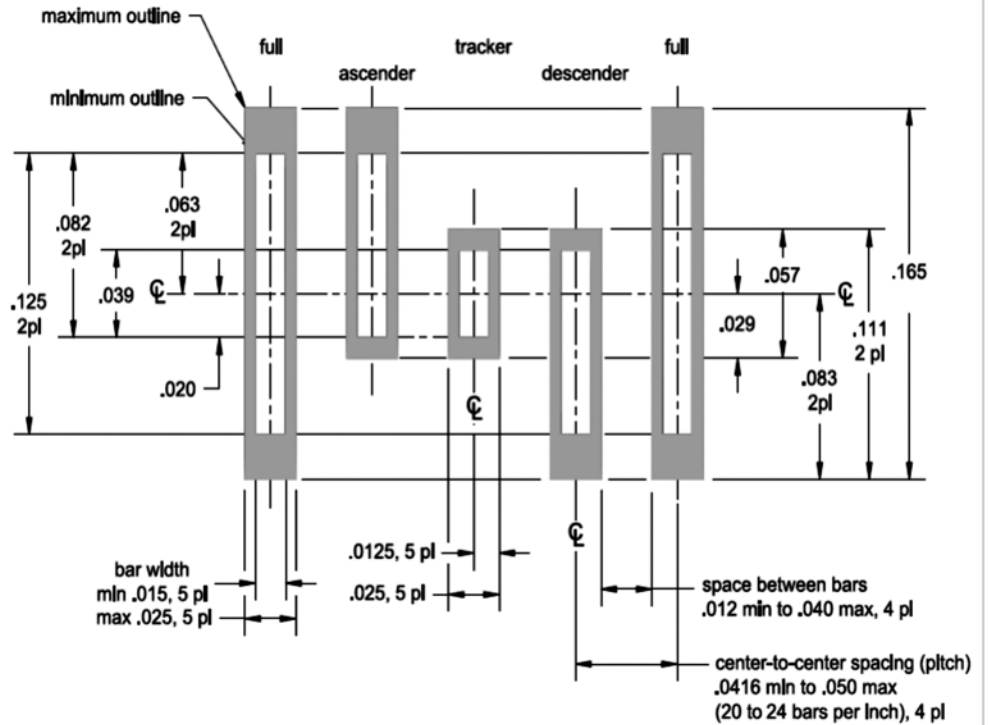


Figure 3. Tolerances for Individual Bars within the IMB.

Specific details about all of the IMB design requirements can be found in a technical guidance PDF created by the USPS.⁵ This technical PDF includes program code for translating your mailer information codes into the IMB format.



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⁵ https://ribbs.usps.gov/intelligentmail_mailpieces/documents/tech_guides/SPUSPSG.pdf