



subscribe now

- [Home](#)
- [Subscribe](#)
- [News](#)
- [Contact Us](#)
- [Content Library](#)
- [Web Exclusive](#)
- [Events](#)
- [Links](#)
- [Blogs](#)
- [Advertise](#)
- [Newsletter](#)
- [Buyer's Guide](#)
- [Who's Who](#)
- [White Papers](#)
- [Job Postings](#)
- [New Products](#)
- [About Us](#)

CONTENT LIBRARY

printer friendly format email page

Issue Date: November 2006, Posted On: 12/22/2006

Invisible Terror Threats

Screening mail for safety

By [Don Shanks](#)

Each day, several million mailpieces cross the country via USPS, express carriers and international agencies — all playing an integral role in the economic growth and prosperity of our country.

It's for this reason the US mail "supply chain" has become a primary target for domestic and international terrorism. Anyone involved in the mail system has seen glimpses of how mail-bound toxins can carry the most severe consequences — and drastically change the way of life:

- Anthrax-contaminated mail discovered in Washington, DC and New Jersey in the early part of the decade shut down USPS facilities in both cities and required months of contamination testing for both workers and facilities.
- 6,000 USPS employees in DC required antibiotics to prevent infection.
- The cleanup of the Hart office building required \$14 million, not including productivity lost due to the closure.
- The Capitol Complex was completely shut down for 11 days after a bio-terrorism attack.
- Nearly 10,000 workers in New Jersey and New York received preventive medical treatment in anthrax scares.
- After four years and thousands of dollars spent on anthrax cleanup, the American Media building in Florida is still uninhabitable.

Since October 2001, there have been 22 cases of anthrax contamination, causing five deaths and turning hundreds of lives upside down. In spite of the numbers, most of these events fell well below the headlines and have been forgotten, thanks to an "out of sight, out of mind" mentality.



SPONSORS OF THIS ISSUE

- AccuZIP INC.
- ANCHOR COMPUTER SOFTWARE
- B.H. BUNN COMPANY
- BAUM CORP.
- BCC SOFTWARE
- BEAR RIVER ASSOCIATES
- BENNETT GROUP
- BÖWE BELL + HOWELL
- BUSINESS OBJECTS
- BUSKRO USA
- CARTER CONTROL SYSTEMS INC.
- CHARNSTROM COMPANY
- COLLINS INK CORPORATION
- DATATECH SMART SOFT INC.
- DOCUMENT DATA SOLUTIONS

Product of



RB PUBLISHING INC.

Are these events not even worth the attention? Have the threats diminished? Are the systems in place to prevent widespread contamination through something that nearly every person touches every day? The answers to these questions are an unequivocal no. Most mail screening operations are not keeping pace with the rapid evolution of real-life threats being placed in the mail — leaving many potentially devastating gaps.

Moving Beyond White Powder

Anthrax was the big name back in '01. Today, it's a small fish in a much bigger pond. Many new, exotic biological and chemical agents have been discovered within mail systems, many of which carry the most fatal consequences. For example, Ricin — a poisonous toxin — cannot be detected by most mail detection systems. With just 500 micrograms of exposure, it can induce fever, severe breathing problems and, many times, death.

This is the same substance that popped up in Bill Frisk's Senate office in February of 2004. It marked the second bio-attack in three years within the Dirksen Senate Office Building, a clear call to action for revitalizing investment in technology and processes to secure mail.

Sarin, another highly dangerous chemical, can deliver even more drastic results. In 1995, terrorists in Tokyo unleashed the chemical from a lunchbox, killing 11 people and injuring more than 5,500. Even though no incidents have been documented within the US, Sarin and other deadlier substances — such as Smallpox, Plague, Tularemia and Botulis — remain a top threat today.

The Perfect Hoaxes

Complicating matters for mail systems are the hundreds of pranks each year, aimed at “innocently” threatening and instilling fear in the general public. The USPS and government agencies continue to receive numerous letters and package hoaxes, containing powders simulating anthrax or other potentially fatal organisms.

The resulting disruptions can be as big as the real thing. In May 2000, the “Klingerman Virus” was delivered in large blue envelopes, with a randomized distribution across the US. Although there was no real threat in the end, the hoax caused lengthy hazardous materials testing, criminal investigations and, most importantly, widespread panic among hundreds of Americans.

Whether to inflict terror or identify the ineffectiveness of security systems, hoaxes make it difficult to determine what's real and what's not. They consume precious resources, costs and time for mail carriers, law enforcement and state and federal agencies.

Staying One Step Ahead

Anyone involved with the transport and processing of mail needs to be aware

DUO SHARE
DUPLO
ENVELOPE MANAGER SOFTWARE
FANNON PRODUCTS
FedEx SMARTPOST
FORMAX
FP MAILING SOLUTIONS
HASLER
INTEMAIL
KERN
KEWILL
MAIL+GARD
MAILNET SERVICES
MCS INC.
MEGASPIREA INTERNATIONAL
MELISSA DATA
NEOPOST
NPI
OPEX CORPORATION
PARASCRIPT LLC
PARCELPOL.COM
PITNEY BOWES INC.
POSTMATIC INC.
PRINTSOFT AMERICAS LLC
RENA SYSTEMS INC.
SECAP
STANDERS' CHOICE HEALTH MATS
XLPRINT USA LLC

of the scope of these threats. The front end of the mail supply chain — mail managers, express carriers and bulk distributors — carries the greatest weight in ensuring that the safety of all individuals down the line isn't compromised.

Organizations, such as the Pentagon, are leading the way for mail sanitation each day — receiving, scanning, analyzing and delivering every piece of mail for its 36,000+ employees. It is taking the most advanced steps to ensure safety 24 hours a day, seven days a week. The trick?

1. **Sorting with Safety:** Automatic sorting machines can be major culprits. They spread "paper dust" through open air and shared ventilation systems, expanding the level of threats from local areas throughout entire mail screening facilities. With just one contaminant, entire buildings could become affected.

2. **Protect for the Worst:** Even the most robust protective gear is subject to penetration from harmful agents. Those handling mail should use gloves and proper respiratory protection to ensure foreign substances remain controlled.

3. **Going Beyond X-Rays:** While effective to some degree, X-ray equipment provides no protection against chemical and biological contaminants — and is subject to frequent human error. The technology often takes considerable training to safely master, due to inconsistent system configuration and item quantities.

4. **Create a Multi-layer Protection Infrastructure:** This is where technology and personnel come together. The Pentagon's fortress consists of advanced technologies and a highly trained staff to screen for all possible biological and chemical toxins, as well as explosive devices.

5. **Top It off with Training:** Beyond screening systems, employees are the biggest shields against these potential disasters. The Pentagon's team benefits from highly advanced training programs designed to keep individuals abreast of the latest trends, threat levels and preventive modes and ensure adoption of security measures.

The Time Is Now

Mail sanitation is one of the most complex processes today — but the cost and time benefits significantly outweigh those related to the cleanup, damage control and massive building closures if one tainted envelope slips through the cracks. Now is the time to take proactive steps towards safeguarding mail. Tomorrow could be too late.

Don Shanks, VP of Engineering for SoBran Inc., can be reached at 703-352-1344 or email dshanks@sobran-inc.com.