

POSTAL NEWS

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1. Focus On Steve Lawson - Editor Of Hellmail

19 July 2010 - Sarah Sharpe - © Hellmail Postal News.

Steve Lawson heads what has become Europe's biggest and most prolific online post and parcel news web site - Hellmail Postal News. Lawson rarely wears a suit, is apt to speak his mind even if it raises eyebrows, and at 51 years of age shows no sign (so far) of relinquishing control.

As well as covering regular news, Hellmail often tackles difficult and sometimes emotive news stories as the postal industry adapts to the ingress of digital technology. I asked him whether the changes going on in the industry, including the decline in stamped mail had changed Hellmail as a result:

"Oh very definitely. Communications - and post forms a part of that of course, is constantly evolving. We're seeing a gradual shift towards the delivery of digital mail services as operators try to claw back ground lost to email and the mobile phone. Digital services have been with us for many years actually, but much of that technology has been targeted at business. Increasingly we'll see more services rolled out to domestic customers, particularly with the universal postal service under so much pressure. Our content is therefore reflecting that change."

Hellmail started life as an online forum, which at its peak was seeing up to 10,000 visitors a day. I asked him whether moving from an online forum to a wholly news-based site had been a smooth transition and what prompted him to make such a drastic change:

"I still get asked this one. It was a major change, no doubt about that. It wasn't so much smooth as a sudden jolt. Not everyone welcomed the scrapping of the original Hellmail forum but I felt it was in danger of losing focus and becoming an expensive white elephant. Yes it was popular, incredibly so, but with online forums you can easily end up with something that costs a fortune to run and nowhere to go with it. I was also concerned that providing a forum that effectively aired the dirty linen of Royal Mail and others was also counter-productive in terms of protecting jobs and reputations. It's a difficult one because I do believe in free speech but at the same time I'm rather fond of the Royal Mail. The vast majority of Brits are and I do want to see it succeed. That was how I saw it at the time and most seem to feel I did the right thing by changing direction. Others seem to have taken up that gauntlet but I don't

envy the time involved in administering them. At the same time, closing such a large arena of opinion left Hellmail with a responsibility in terms of maintaining some diversity in our present output but I think we still have that with prolific writers such as John Cawse, Tim Nestved and others.

"Realistically though, without a clear remit we were never going to get advertisers on board. The change we made not only made Hellmail an international news source, it also created a huge networking opportunity and I'm grateful for the support and enthusiasm shown by operators globally for the work we do. I think everyone accepts that there are going to be weeks when we lambaste someone for something but its our edgy nature that readers seem to enjoy and I think its important that Hellmail remains forthright and honest in its approach rather than sucking up to anyone. Not everyone likes Hellmail's style but Hellmail isn't as an industry trade magazine, nor is it a blog - its quite different."

How much do you edit press releases and comment? Is there not a fine line between delivering varied opinion and stifling free speech?

"Of course and that's what makes the role of an editor such a challenge. I do hold back articles sometimes so we don't end up too weighted in terms of one viewpoint or another, but I don't edit articles a great deal no. I tend to come down heavily on anything that is clearly a drum-banging exercise with little evidence of balance or thought. Even if you hold a strong view you do need to explore the alternatives. For a writer that's a good exercise anyway. I do sometimes ask the writing team if they feel comfortable with me at the helm, and no one has challenged it - either because they're happy with it or too afraid to speak out." He begins to laugh - loudly.

Do you think the Royal Mail would be better privatised?

"Hmmm, not so sure about that. As editor I tend to have a neutral opinion on this but even on a personal level I'm undecided. It's the pension deficit that concerns me. I don't see the point in selling Royal Mail if the bill for the pension is just dumped on the taxpayer for little or no return. That strikes me as a failure not only of liberalisation but a failure for postal customers too. I try to look at this in the context of a communications market that is moving away from letters, but even so I think a sell off, just as a damage limitation exercise is a tad flimsy.

"I partly agree with former chairman Allan Leighton that the best way to stimulate the Royal Mail would be to give postal workers a viable interest in what they do and genuine shares in the business. At the moment they don't really have a vested interest in change or profitability and the existing incentives are too often unachievable for postal workers. They do a tough enough job as it is but if there were a financial reason to back change and efficiency, it would make more sense. It means that everyone counts then and rightly so."

What can we expect of the postal industry over the next ten or twenty years?

"Digital will become more prevalent. There will still be a need to hand-deliver but it's likely to cost more - almost like existing parcel services. Like most things, there will be incentives for persuading people to choose a digital service, you know, virtual

mailboxes rather than letterbox deliveries. It needs safeguards in terms of privacy and protection from Spam but I think many customers would prefer a digital box anyway. We still have a six-day service but most of us could get away with a three-day service already.

So how does he see Hellmail in next ten years?

"We're working on a completely new format and design for next year. We'll still cover all the latest from the post and parcel industry, but regulation across much of Europe covers Internet provision and telephone services. With a blurring of these services, it follows that Hellmail will begin covering areas beyond the present format. For now we're laying the foundations of what will become a more comprehensive news source by developing a much more robust platform. Hellmail has been long overdue for a new design but before we tackle that, we have to ensure we have all the news channels in place and the writers to match. That's already underway and there will be a few days over this month where we'll be halting news output whilst we build a new backend for the entire site."

Do you have any intentions to hand over the reins to anyone else?

"Ha - I thought that one was coming. Yes possibly. If the right opportunity came along. The advantage, and disadvantage I suppose of editing Hellmail is that its independence allows for more exciting output. Most operators for instance have press departments that work under strict policy guidelines in terms of company image and so on, and I admire those that can work within such confines. If you're producing an in-house magazine, it must be incredibly difficult to produce content that is not only interesting but also believable for those that read it. Part of the problem is that many journalists are conditioned to work in a certain way, sticking to all the conventional protocols of copy, but to be honest I see no reason why you can't have a looser approach to delivering content that not only inspires but is honest and perhaps has a sense of humour too. Doing something like that would be rather fun yes.

"Many years ago I used to produce a monthly cartoon for a major food wholesaler, based around faces and characters within the company. It pulled no punches and started out as a fairly underground thing but soon reached the ears of senior management. I was kind of expecting to be given my marching orders but strangely they thought it was great and actually put money into printing thousands of copies every month. I still have a few of those. Not sure I still have the drawing skills now but it does prove the point that you can poke a stick and still command some respect. It's probably where the driving force comes from in terms of editing Hellmail. I think it would be rather foolish to assume that being edgy is a negative thing. If the right job came along, yes I might just take it. I'm sure Hellmail would do fine on its own."

You talk to all European operators, are there any that particularly stand out?

"Well it depends in what way. I'm rather fond of Swiss Post. They've always been incredibly helpful in terms of research and I bitterly regret not being able to attend the opening of their new UK base this year - perhaps they'll invite me again. Great company to do business with, wonderful staff and remain my real favourite for numerous reasons.

"TNT Post too - I had a rather interesting phone call from Kees van den Heuvel on his way to a meeting in the Netherlands and we talked about the growth and development of digital mail. Its always refreshing to hear from experts with a positive approach in what are difficult times. The Ukraine postal service is also a good communicator and generally the most prolific in terms of news but to be honest all the Baltic states, many of which are really struggling right now have always been great when it comes to providing an insight into what they do and the challenges they face. Hellmail is very keen to give them a voice and we're always prompting them to do more. Lithuania, Romania, Latvia, and Czech Post - all of these operators need as much support as we can give them really.

"They don't have the commercial clout of some of the big players and the worry is that without the investment, they're far more likely to lose out under postal liberalisation so yes, they're important to us too."

What makes you laugh?

"Television? - "The worst week of my life" written by Mark Bussell and Justin Sbresni, probably the smartest bit of writing for many years - Geoffrey Whitehead was wonderful in that. I only have to think about him super glued to his son-in-law to take the chill off a bad day. It's a kind of concentrated and modern version of the old Brian Rix farces - very funny. Otherwise children make me laugh. I used to live out in the sticks and my eldest, who was then about four, used to play in the lane outside. It was a quiet lane and barely saw any traffic at all but worried he might venture further down on to the main road, I gave him a pep talk on the dangers and that I was worried he might get squashed. He thought about it for a moment and said, "Yes Daddy but then we'd need a boy pump". You can't answer that.

My thanks to Steve Lawson for giving me time to interview him and for providing an insight into the future of postal provision and the development of Hellmail Postal News.

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2. Postal Bank to begin with Visa debit cards

The Post Office will bear no credit risk.

19 July 10 14:24, Eran PeerIsrael Postal Company Ltd. plans to launch Visa debit cards in the first quarter of 2011, pursuant to an issuers license from Visa Europe. The Post Office will only issue cards; it will not clear them, and clearing will be handled by one of Israel's three credit card companies: Israel Credit Cards-Cal Ltd. (ICC-Cal) (Visa), Isracard Ltd., or Leumi Card Ltd.. The Post Office will publish a tender next month for choosing the clearing company.

Although Visa Europe awarded an issuer license for all type of credit cards, the Postal Bank will initially only issue debit cards, which means that the Postal Office will bear no credit risk. The Post Office's target audience for the debit cards will be 400,000

Postal Bank customers with checking accounts. These accounts' deposits total about NIS 1 billion, or an average of NIS 2,500 per account.

A debit card automatically deducts purchases or cash withdrawals by the card from the customer's bank account. These cards have several advantages for the poor: a low card debt, immediate payment, and giving cardholders better control of spending.

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3. Newly Elected Former JPMorgan Banker to Fight Japan Postal Bill

July 13, 2010, 1:22 AM EDT

July 13 (Bloomberg) -- Kenji Nakanishi, a former JPMorgan Chase & Co. banker elected to Japan's parliament two days ago, said he will fight proposed legislation to strengthen the state-owned postal savings system.

Nakanishi, 46, was one of 10 members of "Your Party" to win seats in elections for the Diet's upper house. The new party will oppose the government plan to double the cap on deposits at the nation's postal bank to 20 million yen (\$225,000) and keep a stake in the company after taking it public, he said.

Prime Minister Naoto Kan's Democratic Party of Japan lost its majority in the upper house and coalition partner the People's New Party failed to win any seats in the July 11 vote. PNP head Shizuka Kamei is the driving force behind the Japan Post bill, which Kan introduced before the election.

"What Japan should do is to invigorate the private sector," Nakanishi said in an interview. "What the DPJ and Kamei's party are doing is totally the opposite. Japan Post's government links will hurt other banks."

Kan's party still controls the more powerful lower house, though without the two-thirds majority needed to overrule objections from the upper chamber. Your Party leader Yoshimi Watanabe has ruled out joining the coalition, saying he preferred to work with the government on policies where he shares a common perspective.

Kamei's proposed legislation would allow Japan Post Bank Co., the world's biggest bank by deposits, to double the amount of savings it takes from individual customers and potentially start offering loans. The government plans to keep at least a one-third stake in Japan Post after an initial public offering.

Stake Sale

The government should sell its entire stake in Japan Post and keep the deposit cap no higher than 10 million yen to prevent it from discouraging private sector competition, Nakanishi said. More than half of the savings are used to purchase Japanese government bonds.

Nakanishi, who quit as JPMorgan's Japan deputy president last year, won a seat in Kanagawa prefecture, southwest of Tokyo. Other victorious Your Party candidates included Kouta Matsuda, former president of Tully's Coffee Japan Co.

More than half of 1,318 investment bankers and executives surveyed by BizReach Inc., a Tokyo-based recruitment company, said in May they may support the new party. The survey was open to 24,000 registered users of the firm and conducted between May 10 and May 14.

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