

Blackstone and the Post Office

by Kristin Huff

Check out [The Ryan Stark Interview](#), the latest in our Slick Talk podcast series. This wide-ranging interview covers everything from the early days of Blackstone, how the business has evolved over the years, and of course fun facts about the man himself.

TL;DR: Request new labels and mailers [here!](#)

"I am FED UP," said the customer on the phone. "Do you even have my sample? I mailed it a *month* ago." I looked up his tracking number and he wasn't exaggerating – he mailed it September 15, and we had just received it that day, October 15. Sound familiar?

Why is it taking so long for samples to arrive? And what are we doing about it? Read on, Blackstone fans. Have we got a story for you.



The Post Office Makes Some Changes

"I think the post office isn't charging us enough." Ryan Stark, Blackstone's president, and my brother and business partner, said to me one day last November after reconciling the checkbook. He'd noticed that for the last few months, the amount we were paying in postage had dropped significantly.

Stick with me, this is all going to tie together.

Last summer, just as we were all realizing the pandemic was not simply going to disappear, I learned the post office was ending their Merchandise Returns program. Because our samples came back to us on MR labels, we needed to create a new one, so I had my printer start working on it. A major part of that process is getting approval from the USPS at various points along the way. And that's where the process slowed...then slowed down some more...and then, like molasses on a winter sidewalk, came to a creeping halt.

We called USPS. How's the label going? No reply. We emailed. How's the label coming along? Nothing. Time passes. Months go by. Sometimes we'd get a reply – "We should have an answer for you soon!" But then...nada.

Back to the Money

Meanwhile, the issue of not paying enough postage was still a problem. What do you do when you think the USPS isn't charging your business enough? You call them – so I did. I first contacted my local post office – the ones who deliver us samples every day, the ones who know who we are and what we do. "I

think we're not being charged enough," I explained. "Nope, that's not me," she said. "They take care of that in Indianapolis now." She gave me a number, so I called down to Indy. "Huh," the Indy person said. "Let me look into it."

Reader, you can see where this is going.

I got nowhere in November, so I called again in December, and then again in January. "Hey!" I said. "I still don't think we're getting charged enough!" "Hmmm" said the voice on the line. "Let me ask my supervisor about that."

Time marches on. After calling and emailing various USPS representatives throughout February and March, I got fed up in April and sent an email blast to every single USPS contact I had, including the ones in Washington, D.C.

That one got some attention.

They started looking into what was going on, and to make a long story short, the issue culminated in a conference call with several USPS bigwigs. "Well," said Bigwig #1, "you owe us (insert a huge amount of postage here. Nope, it was more than that).

It turns out that when the USPS stopped their Merchandise Returns program, our local post office stopped charging us for our incoming samples. We were still being charged for outgoing mail, but we hadn't paid postage on *incoming* samples since the MR program ended in August. After much gnashing of teeth and some heated words on my end (would they ever have caught the problem if I hadn't kept after them? We'll never know), we settled on a plan to pay the outstanding postage. As part of this reconciliation, one of the USPS Bigwigs suggested we have samples returned to us in a Tyvek envelope, to help catch spills. Well, oil spills aren't really the problem with getting samples delivered, but I tucked the idea away for the future.

Back to the Labels

Meanwhile, the new label *still* had not been approved. And people still needed kits. While all this was going on, we continued to print and send out hundreds of thousands of old labels on kits. What choice did we have? Now those old Merchandise Return labels are now on kits that are sitting in garages, hangars, and marinas all over the country.

New label: Good!



Old label: Bad!



So when did we get it resolved? We officially started printing our new, USPS-approved label on August 26 of *this* year – more than a year after the old label was officially discontinued. The thing is, the post office reassured me that it would be fine to continue to use our old label – we would just have to pay more when people returned them.

Which is fine. Fine, fine,

fine. Except, for some post offices, it's not so fine. Most of those old, Merchandise Return-labeled kits get here no problem. But occasionally, a post office will hold on to it and not deliver it because it's the old label, even though they said we could keep using them. At this point, there's nothing we can do about the thousands of old labels that are in circulation except try and get the word out. So that's why you're reading this. If you have old labels on your kits (they say Merchandise Return right on them), [click here](#) to ask for new ones. We really do want to receive your samples. And we don't want you to have to wait for a month to get your results.

But Wait, There's More!

So while all of *that* was going on, Travis – a long-time Senior Analyst-turned-coder – had an idea. “What if,” he said to me one day, “we do a test to see if putting samples in the Tyvek envelope helps with the return postage time?” Because although oil spills aren't a significant problem, it does seem to be a problem that the mailer is 1) small, and 2) clearly headed for a laboratory. Putting the oil into a Tyvek envelope might solve both issues. So we started a test – for one month, we sent all outgoing kits with a labeled Tyvek envelope for returning the sample to Blackstone.

The results were immediate and striking: this was a winner. We didn't even run the test for the full month. The data Travis put together showed that return times were cut in HALF (from an average of 8.74 to 3.48 days) when samples came back to us in the Tyvek envelope. (See the sidebar.) We stopped the test and immediately started including Tyvek envelopes with each kit order, for return samples.

USPS Supporters

Despite the problems, we are proud supporters of the United States Postal Service. No other carrier offers service to every single part of the US, no matter how remote. Lots of people don't have access to UPS or FedEx, though if you want to use them to send in your samples, that's absolutely fine.

The changes we've made to our label and the return package are already paying off in getting samples to us in a timely fashion. If you need new return envelopes and labels for your kits, [let us know](#) – we're happy to send them out!

It's interesting that the average time with the new labels and bags is two days better than the shortest time with the old labels and bottles, and the longest new time (Montana) is still a full day better than the average old time. Shout out to Louisiana and Nevada, for really turning it around, and to the handful of states showing little change because they had reasonable return rates in the first place!

Inbound column: One month's average return time in days with old labels.			
New labels/bags column: one month's average return time in days with the new labels and tyvek envelopes.			
	Inbound	New Labels/Bags	Bottle vs. Bag
State	Avg	Avg	Difference
AK	5.77	4.08	-1.69
AL	7.41	3.04	-4.37
AR	8.32	2.59	-5.73
AZ	10.02	4.02	-6.00
CA	8.42	4.76	-3.67
CO	9.48	5.62	-3.86
CT	6.86	4.38	-2.47
DE	11.01	3.21	-7.80
FL	8.12	4.10	-4.02
GA	9.25	4.05	-5.20
HI	11.32	5.86	-5.46
IA	9.69	2.42	-7.27
ID	10.72	4.46	-6.26
IL	10.04	3.26	-6.78
IN	5.19	1.53	-3.66
KS	10.16	3.69	-6.48
KY	7.28	2.36	-4.92
LA	19.70	3.37	-16.34
MA	10.51	5.63	-4.88
MD	7.90	4.32	-3.58
ME	7.42	3.53	-3.89
MI	6.37	2.59	-3.78
MN	8.09	3.69	-4.40
MO	11.79	2.43	-9.36
MS	5.95	3.80	-2.15
MT	11.50	7.83	-3.68
NC	5.78	2.68	-3.10
ND	5.20	5.03	-0.17
NE	6.05	2.92	-3.13
NH	9.16	4.72	-4.44
NJ	10.13	3.63	-6.50
NM	9.41	6.48	-2.93
NV	16.29	3.81	-12.49
NY	8.54	3.28	-5.26
OH	7.01	2.47	-4.54
OK	10.84	3.97	-6.87
OR	8.43	3.27	-5.16
PA	8.47	3.50	-4.96
RI	7.00	4.07	-2.93
SC	6.68	3.34	-3.35
SD	6.73	2.81	-3.92
TN	8.36	2.82	-5.54
TX	12.14	4.21	-7.93
UT	7.22	4.11	-3.11
VA	6.70	2.90	-3.80
VT	9.66	4.94	-4.72
WA	7.53	3.72	-3.81
WI	7.35	3.05	-4.30
WV	10.33	1.52	-8.81
WY	8.38	2.65	-5.73
All	8.83	3.73	-5.10



Report of the Month

This 1985 Firebird has a problem. What happened?
To learn where the elements are coming from, [click here](#) and scroll down.

UNIT	MAKE/MODEL:	GM LS-1 5.7L 350 CI V-8	OIL TYPE & GRADE:	Amsoil 15W/50
	FUEL TYPE:	Gasoline (Unleaded)	OIL USE INTERVAL:	14 Hours
	ADDITIONAL INFO:			

COMMENTS	Cylinder-area metals are high in this first sample. Aluminum, chrome, and iron can show piston, ring, and steel (presumably cylinder, but also rotating shaft) wear. Maybe dirt and/or coolant are factors -- silicon can show dirt (unless it's from sealers) and sodium could show coolant, though we're guessing it's just an oil additive from your previous oil. Maybe most of the metal is wear-in that still needs to wash out, but check for air intake leaks, watch for possible coolant loss, and keep an eye out for signs of cylinder trouble. Averages are based on 4,000-mile intervals.			
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ELEMENTS IN PARTS PER MILLION	MI/HR on Oil	14	UNIT / LOCATION AVERAGES						UNIVERSAL AVERAGES
	MI/HR on Unit	55							
	Sample Date	9/28/2021							
	Make Up Oil Added								
	ALUMINUM	16	16						4
	CHROMIUM	5	5						1
	IRON	58	58						16
	COPPER	7	7						26
	LEAD	7	7						9
	TIN	2	2						1
	MOLYBDENUM	29	29						76
	NICKEL	1	1						1
	MANGANESE	1	1						2
	SILVER	0	0						0
	TITANIUM	1	1						1
	POTASSIUM	1	1						2
	BORON	48	48						70
	SILICON	48	48						11
	SODIUM	116	116						17
	CALCIUM	1642	1642						2045
	MAGNESIUM	440	440						344
	PHOSPHORUS	1169	1169						759
	ZINC	1354	1354						894
	BARIUM	0	0						0

Values
Should Be*

PROPERTIES	SUS Viscosity @ 210°F	81.7	75-92					
	cSt Viscosity @ 100°C	15.94	14.3-18.7					
	Flashpoint in °F	410	>390					
	Fuel %	<0.5	<2.0					
	Antifreeze %	?	0.0					
	Water %	0.0	<0.1					
	Insolubles %	0.3	<0.6					
	TBN							
	TAN							
	ISO Code							

* THIS COLUMN APPLIES ONLY TO THE CURRENT SAMPLE

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The owner writes: Just as a follow up: you were right on with the aluminum, chrome, and iron. We found low compression in two cylinders after sending the oil sample. We disassembled the engine and found two broken pistons (with accompanying ring wear, and some light scoring of the cylinder). Pistons were broken between top and second ring, so the engine was still running reasonably well but causing the additional wear in the cylinder, which showed up in your test.