

Mailers will enjoy stampless mail service some day in future

By MARY A.C. FALLON
Knight-Ridder News Service

SAN JOSE, Calif. — Someday, you will be able to mail all those Christmas greetings without having to lick a single stamp.

And instead of calling an overnight service to deliver a crucial document from San Jose to Boston, you'll simply hit a few keys on the computer, and, zap, it will be there.

Progress in electronic mail isn't stymied by a lack of technology. Rather, the stumbling block is the computer makers themselves,

because they have never agreed on standard ways computers should be designed. Without standards, computers can't communicate.

In April, however, progress should get a jolt. Eighteen major computer and technology companies, organized as the Corpora-

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— Messaging product manager

tion for Open Systems, and companies from Canada and Europe are scheduled to meet to approve preliminary design standards for electronic mail.

By early 1987, most of them expect to market special computer software that will allow written electronic messages and documents to travel between different brands of computers.

"Once standards are in place, the use of electronic mail will skyrocket," said Marshall Cupp, a messaging product manager at Northern Telecom Inc.'s Santa Clara office.

The proposed blueprint for sen-

X.400.

It's the first step by the Corporation for Open Systems to standardize many aspects of computer design.

To understand X.400, picture telephone cables, satellite signals and microwave antennas as the rails that carry boxcars filled with messages. These messages are lined up in a specific order inside the boxcars so that a computer can read the messages when they're unloaded. That order, or format, is called X.400. It will enable a computer built by one company to feed information to a computer built by another company.

Because the ability of computers to communicate is vital, a lot of effort is being made to ensure that X.400 is successfully accepted as the international messaging standard.

Computer makers already have had experience matching a stan-

"boxcar" itself, called X.25, was chosen as a communications standard. But it failed as a standard because companies interpreted its design features differently.

"It took eight years for all the bugs to get worked out of X.25," Cupp said.

The industry isn't looking forward to a repeat performance.

"The lack of connectivity among different companies' systems has inhibited growth," Cupp said.

John Stidd, a software communications product manager in Xerox Corp.'s Palo Alto office, believes there are "no more than 1 (million) to 2 million subscribers to electronic mail services, and a lot of those people have more than one service."

If X.400 becomes a standard, Cupp said, "Electronic mail will have a tremendous growth in the next 10 years."

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