

21st century

Radical changes in the world of the postal operator were under discussion at the European Mail Users Forum and Post-Expo 2003 staged in Belgium. **SALLY HOOTON** reports.



MOST OF THE glorious buildings surrounding the famed Grand Place in the centre of Brussels had not been built at the time of the social and political Reformation of the 16th century. Yet they were standing proud and strong this autumn when a modern-day renaissance was under discussion just a few kilometres away.

Not unlike the movement some five centuries ago, this one is all about those who resist change and those who embrace it.

More, it's about *communication*.

And it was an air of impatience which largely communicated itself to me as I joined the crowd on the first morning of the first European Mail Users Forum, running alongside the well-attended Post-Expo, now in its seventh year.

As globalisation increases, the mail users are anxious to get on with postal market liberalisation, believing healthy competition from private sector mail operators will add value and choice; improving the performance of de-monopolised Posts around the world, raising quality of service and keeping prices within acceptable and fair boundaries.

Not daunted

The Posts are not daunted by the challenge of deregulation, but are – quite understandably – in no mad rush to press the Go button. Instead, as liberalisation looms, they have been preparing – proactively seeking and putting into place

alternative revenue streams – and indirectly reinforcing their historic role as carriers of information and knowledge. Serving, as the director general of the Universal Postal Union (UPU) **Thomas E Leavey** puts it: "as a lifeline to the outside world", for example, via the introduction of Internet kiosks at post offices and in poor and remote areas, as well as offering financial, mail order and third-party services at post office counters and across the Web.



Thomas E Leavey

And, as the European Commission's spokesman at the forum, **Fernando Toledano**, pointed out, "moving from a monopoly to a completely different market" takes a considerable amount of time.



Philippe Bodson

Toledano stressed that the EU's objective in opening up the markets was "not to phase out the post office but to introduce other postal operators – and certainly this could not be achieved overnight". He added that the "process of enlargement" would expand the market and set up challenges and opportunities for all, providing the "incentive to move forward".



Peter Somers

Great, say the mail users. When?

The liberalisation plan is earmarked for completion across all European member states by 2009, but it's a foggy estimate many believe is shrouded merely in hope rather than probability. And even as the grip of the Posts loosens, many do not believe change will take place quickly enough, if at all – as **Philippe Bodson**, president of the Free and Fair Post Initiative, commented: "The incumbents

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