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POSTAL SERVICES – AUTOMATED

PROCESSING OF MAIL ITEMS – FACING

IDENTIFICATION MARKS

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**Postal services – Automated processing of mail items – Facing
identification marks**

This Technical Specification (CEN/TS) was approved by CEN on 16 October 2002 for provisional application.

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Foreword

This document (CEN/TS 14442:2003) has been prepared by Technical Committee CEN /TC 331 "Postal services", the secretariat of which is held by NEN.

This document has been prepared under a mandate given to CEN by the European Commission and the European Free Trade Association, and supports essential requirements of EU Directive(s).

According to the CEN/CENELEC Internal Regulations, the national standards organizations of the following countries are bound to announce this European Standard: Austria, Belgium, Czech Republic, Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Iceland, Ireland, Italy, Luxembourg, Malta, Netherlands, Norway, Portugal, Slovakia, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland and the United Kingdom.

This Technical Specification includes a Bibliography.

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Introduction

The automated processing of letter mail generally requires that items are oriented in a common way, with the delivery address and eventual postage evidence facing the automated reading device and with the bottom edges aligned¹⁾. Mail that is oriented in this way is referred to as being faced.

The majority of business-generated mail is already faced at the time of acceptance into the postal system. This is not the case for mail that is deposited in street or post office collection boxes. Prior to automated sorting, such mail requires facing, either manually or by means of automated facing machines. The facing function is often integrated with other mail preparation functions, such as culling and cancelling²⁾.

For facing purposes, some means of detecting both the orientation and the front of the item are required. This is achieved in many different ways, including:

- use of postage stamp features such as serration pattern, image and/or encoding with phosphorescent or fluorescent bars or dots;
- postage meter franking marks printed using fluorescent ink;
- patterns of horizontal or vertical bars, called facing identification marks or FIM's.

A FIM is thus a mark placed on a mail item to assist in facing the item. It is generally applied to the upper right corner of the front ¹⁾ of the mail item. Different FIM patterns may also be used for mail stream separation, for example to distinguish between business reply and normal mail; to distinguish between different mail priorities or even to segregate out particular high-volume mail flows, such as tax returns; bank transfers or charity donations.

FIM's are widely used, though they are not used in every EU country and, in some countries, they are currently used only for manual facing. The FIM's currently in use vary from country to country. Thus for example, Denmark, the Netherlands and the United Kingdom use (different) patterns of vertical bars whilst Austria and Portugal use horizontal bar patterns.

As long as items are mailed only in the country of production, the existence of different FIM's in different countries does not pose any problem. Increasingly, however, it is expected that items, and especially pre-addressed envelopes and business reply mail, will be mailed in other countries.

As illustrated by the following example, this can lead to difficulties in facing. Suppose a company in Austria sends a letter to its customer in the United Kingdom. This letter contains a prepaid envelope for the reply, which will need to be faced and cancelled in the U.K. and then sent to Austria. However the pre-paid envelope will carry an Austrian-post facing identification mark. This will not be recognised by Royal Mail, even though the latter uses FIM's for automated facing. The item will be rejected for manual processing.

As a result of such issues, when a contract to process international business reply (IBRS) mail³⁾ has been signed between the postal operators of two countries, the whole process – preparation of the mail, sorting, request for payment to the licensee and sharing of this payment between the operators – needs to be done manually. To mechanise this process an international FIM mark would be needed. This would allow IBRS mail to be segregated, sorted by destination country, automatically counted and accounted between the two postal operators involved.

¹⁾ For letter mail items, UPU standard S19 defines the Front, or Face ; the Reverse and the Bottom edge. It also defines a number of encoding areas, which will include the area for printing FIMs.

²⁾ Culling involves the separation, from the mail stream, of items which are too large, too thick, too flimsy or too rigid to pass through subsequent sortation equipment ; cancellation is the process of applying postmarks to prevent fraudulent re-use of evidence of payment and to record the date and location of initial processing.

³⁾ The UPU has defined an International Business Reply Service (IBRS), but this makes no mention of the use of FIM's ; is clearly oriented towards manual processing and is limited to a single class of service.

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