

## **Feds can't compete with private industry**

*By Rick Maier*

I stopped by the Post Office to buy a roll of 34-cent stamps. The man behind the counter looked at the back of my credit card and asked me to sign it. I politely refused because I'm very protective of my signature, and offered a picture ID. He politely refused to look at my ID and referred to a government bulletin that prohibits taking unsigned credit cards. I didn't have an extra thirty-four dollars in cash, so I left without any stamps.

Next I stopped at the Exxon station. A quick wave of my little Speedpass wand lit up the picture of the tiger on the pump, and I was immediately filling my car with gas. No credit card, no picture ID, no need to answer any questions, no signature, no hassle. Presto – charged to the very same credit card the Post Office wouldn't accept.

It struck me how differently these two organizations treat me as a customer. One jumps through hoops to get my business, while the other doesn't seem to care if I come in or not. One is innovative and willing to take risks to capture more market share, while the other spends a lot of their resource developing regulations. One cashier in a gas station services dozens of customers simultaneously, where highly trained people are needed to explain complicated policies at the Post Office. Our government may be faster, better and cheaper than other government, but they can't keep up with American industry.

Still needing stamps, I returned to the Post Office a couple days later, cash in hand. As I approached the long line of people at the counter, I spotted a vending machine with rolls of stamps. This was their big chance to impress me - maybe the Post Office could be responsive after all! But my excitement vanished when I deposited two twenties and received six of those one-dollar coins as change. I held the coins in my hand, afraid to mix them with my other change, until I dumped them on the lady at the dry cleaners.

Now credit cards and little black wands may not be crucial issues to everyone, but I'm one of those guys who gets on an airplane, and if my tray table is dirty, I figure that the jet engines probably aren't maintained either.

I still marvel at being able to send a letter great distances in a couple of days for only 34-cents, but who knows how much better things could be if the government had some competition. The way they treat customers at the counter may be the tip of the iceberg of other more significant, behind the scene inefficiencies.

I don't want to let private companies bid on defending our nation or running the Treasury, but wherever we can, let's keep the government from invading and controlling areas that industry could perform.

The latest example is the Federal government taking over security at airports. The private companies have made plenty of blunders, but at least they managed costs. With the Feds running things we'll spend a lot more money and still get blunders. No one can blame private airport security companies for the September 11<sup>th</sup> hijackings. Private companies could implement new stricter policies as well or better than government agents. If anything the Immigration Service dropped the ball, but instead of getting criticized, they get rewarded with more money to hire more people.

The tragedy of Federal programs is that we seldom re-evaluate them, and we almost never privatize or revisit the need for an agency once it's established. We're on a one way street toward greater and greater government control.

If the government sold gas, the fueling stations would be positioned every few miles and they'd only be open weekdays from 9 to 4:30. There would be different prices for different special interest groups, but we'd generally pay a lot more for gas and the agency would run a huge deficit. You couldn't buy anything but gas at the place, and they would never have thought of pay-at-the-pump, let alone those cool little wand gizmos.

Rest assured, free market forces will win in the end. I'm doing more and more business electronically these days. Now if we could just convince our government to let us decide who can use the mailboxes we paid to put in front of our houses.

(Picture of a Speedpass on a key ring)

The Speedpass wand is a free, secure alternative to credit cards and can be used at a growing number of gas stations, convenience stores and fast food restaurants.