
Instant Smilers



My previous article, *The Story of Smilers Photo stamps*, put into context the development of photo stamps world-wide. It gave a broad overview of this relatively new postal product that has been made possible by the advancement of computer and printing technologies. This follow-up article reveals the background to the vending of Instant Smilers during the period 29 October 2001 to 31 January 2002.

Background

Royal Mail, in conjunction with Snap Digital Imaging adapted the software in photo booths within six Post Offices across the nation to produce photo stamps instantly.

Royal Mail chose Snap Digital Imaging as their partner in these trials because they are the world's second biggest photo booth operators, with a proven record of accomplishment for innovation. They also already have their equipment sited in all main UK Post Offices, many shopping centres, universities and multiple retailers, so the basic infrastructure for such a project was in place.

Trial Locations

The locations for the trial were the Post Offices sited at Castle Gallery **Bristol**, St. Andrews Street **Cambridge**, High Street **Canterbury**, St. James's Centre, **Edinburgh**, William IV Street (Trafalgar Square) **London** and Spring Gardens **Manchester**.

Each photo booth bore a poster and three adhesive labels publicising the additional stamp service, using phrases such as 'your photo on a sheet of stamps', 'ready in under a minute' and 'send them a smile'. The first two utilised the Christmas design and the third one of the Smiles stamp designs.

The Process

To take part in the trial, a customer entered one of the adapted photo booths, pulling the curtain across to maintain their privacy and to exclude extraneous light that might have spoiled the image. They then adjusted the corkscrew seat to the correct level ensuring that, regardless of their height, they had an acceptable, well balanced image.

Next came choosing the Smilers option on the colour touch-screen, paying by cash or credit card and selecting the design of stamp sheet required from two options (first class Smiles Greetings stamps or the Smilers? For Christmas (first class Father Christmas) stamps). The Christmas design was, not surprisingly, withdrawn as an option on 24 December 2001.

Customers then posed for four digital photo images, selecting their favourite one for the stamps, and finally took a printed receipt to the counter to collect their instantly generated sheets.

Receipts

The receipts were a collectible in their own right because they included a photograph of the customer, as used on the photo stamps to verify that they were

the correct person to hand the printed sheet to. I am unsure as to whether the receipt was then handed back to the customer following verification, but can only assume that it was. The receipt bore a unique reference number that also appeared on the printed Instant Smilers? sheet.

Sight of one of these receipts would enable it to be illustrated in a future update, if any visitor can assist. (I would also welcome ownership of one of the receipts and vended stamp sheets if any visitor is willing to sell me one, please!)

Product Pricing and Sales

The price of taking part in this trial came to £7.50 for ten stamps. This is around the same cost as the non-vended photo stamps ordered from Royal Mail Tallents House, Edinburgh. Take-up of the vended sheets from each location was apparently 'negligible'.

Free Sheets

At the ATEI 2002 trade show at Earl's Court, London in late January, Snap Digital had a stand from where they demonstrated to visitors the potential of the photo stamps product using the Father Christmas first class stamp design. These were given to customers in exchange for their company contact details.

Roll-out Plans

The cost of printers behind Post Office counters proved too expensive during the trial (several thousand pounds each). It had, therefore, been intended to use a Wireless Local Area Network (phone line!) to relay the digitally taken image to Snap Digital's production facility in Buckinghamshire. From there, the sheets would have been printed and despatched to the customer by mail.

The ability to do this would have involved the use of a touch-screen in the photo booth from where customers could touch a virtual keyboard and type in their requirements, address details and make payment by debit or credit card. A major advantage of this change of process meant that sales were no longer restricted to Post Offices, enabling Snap Digital's network of other outlets to be fully utilised.

The proposed remote printing process had a further benefit, namely the control of blank stamp stocks, which would rest with Snap Digital and Royal Mail. This would help ensure that 'inappropriate' images were never produced and affixed to items of mail. Incidentally, most countries that have adopted photo stamps include terms and conditions about what may or may not be sent in as a photograph. The local police force is invariably mentioned should 'suspect' images be submitted!

Plug-Pulled

The project had reached an advanced stage when Royal Mail, for whatever reason, made a business decision not to proceed. So, unfortunately, for now at least, the Instant Smilers project has been shelved. Let's hope that with the apparent commitment to the Smilers Generic Sheets and the advertising campaigns underway in magazines such as *TV Times* for non-vended photo stamps, that we shall see the eventual resurrection of this interesting project.

Update - June 2003

The current range of Smilers sheets were available through the Snap Digital machines from Monday 2 June, 2003 - look out for the machines in post offices, shops, etc. Price £15. I asked for a list of the machine locations and was told there were 'hundreds', including Safeway's supermarkets.

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