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SINGAPORE POST Ltd.: RECURRENT SERVICE FAILURES[[1]](#endnote-1)

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In June 2017, one year after the abrupt resignation of the previous chief executive officer (CEO), Singapore Post Ltd. (SingPost) appointed Paul William Coutts as the new CEO. With over 20 years of executive experience with global logistics and postal companies, Coutts was well positioned and greatly anticipated to lead the group toward an integrated e-commerce logistics platform and a globally competitive business.[[2]](#endnote-2)

However, by April 2019, SingPost was plagued with service lapses and operational issues that generated complaints from customers and concerns from respective national agencies.[[3]](#endnote-3) Faced with increasing pressures from rising customer expectations, surging mail volumes, and the growing popularity of e-commerce, SingPost needed to determine how to remain competitive and regain the confidence of its stakeholders. How could SingPost increase the robustness of its service recovery process to prevent the negative escalation of events? What measures could the company take to prevent these issues in the future?

THE SINGAPORE POSTAL MARKET

SingPost was one of four companies licensed to provide basic mail service in Singapore. Its three competitors were Asendia Management SAS, DHL International GmbH, and World Marketing Group. These three companies were originally granted Postal Services Operations Licences that allowed them to deliver letters weighing up to 500 grams each, in addition to business mail and direct mail for marketers. [[4]](#endnote-4)

Singapore’s postal service was privatized on April 1, 1992.[[5]](#endnote-5) At that time, SingPost received a 15-year exclusive right to deliver the post domestically and internationally over various forms of transport.[[6]](#endnote-6) The company was also granted a 25-year Public Postal Licence that provided SingPost the duty of maintaining postal boxes and providing basic mail service to anyone in Singapore. On February 5, 2007, Singapore’s minister for information, communications, and the arts announced that basic mail services would be liberalized on April 1, 2007, which would allow other companies to apply for a Postal Services Operations Licence.[[7]](#endnote-7)

Eventually, SingPost delivered most basic mail in Singapore. The parcel delivery service industry was more competitive, however, with many different companies offering door-to-door delivery.[[8]](#endnote-8)

SINGPOST

Background

For 160 years, SingPost was one of the main postal service providers in Singapore, delivering trusted and reliable postal services to homes and businesses. As a pioneer and leader in e-commerce logistics in Singapore, SingPost operated in 19 domestic and international postal service markets. SingPost prided itself on delivering “end-to-end integrated digital mail solutions” and offering e-commerce logistic solutions such as last mile delivery and international freight forwarding.[[9]](#endnote-9)

Profits

SingPost experienced positive profit growth over the years. In financial year 2017–18, the company earned S$126.4 million[[10]](#endnote-10) in profits for a 278.4 per cent increase over the previous year (see Exhibit 1). The company’s revenue in 2017–18 was S$1.46 billion, for an increase of 8.6 per cent over the previous year, thanks to growth in e-commerce activities in the postal and logistics services.[[11]](#endnote-11)

On February 1, 2019, SingPost announced revenue growth of 7.6 per cent for the third quarter of 2018–19 to reach S$441.4 million[[12]](#endnote-12) (see Exhibit 2). The increase was attributed to higher contributions from all business units during the global e-commerce peak season. Specifically, in the post and parcel delivery segment, growth in domestic and international e-commerce deliveries across the peak season resulted in a profit increase of 10 per cent on operating activities. However, strong performance in the post and parcel segment and in the logistics and property segment was overshadowed by losses in US e-commerce businesses. Therefore, overall profit from operating activities fell by 8.5 per cent to S$42.2 million (see Exhibit 2). Nevertheless, domestic margins were reported to be “improving on operating synergies from the ongoing integration of its postal and parcel last mile delivery networks.”[[13]](#endnote-13)

Management

In the previous two years, SingPost had undergone a major transformation in its organizational structure due to a series of departures at both the senior and board levels of management. Five directors, including the group’s previous CEO, had resigned abruptly. The events caused a drop in both the company’s share price and the confidence level of investors.[[14]](#endnote-14) It took SingPost more than one year to overcome the loss with the 2017 appointment of Coutts, who was expected bring about a transformation and maintain the company’s competitiveness in the global market. On April 1, 2019, SingPost announced another major addition to the company’s management with the appointment of Vincent Phang as CEO of postal services. Phang would oversee the post, parcel, and logistics segment for the company’s Singapore business.[[15]](#endnote-15)

Employee Management Systems

The Singapore employment standards agency, Tripartite Alliance for Fair & Progressive Employment Practices, identified SingPost as one of the best employers, due to its promotion of an inclusive workplace culture.[[16]](#endnote-16) To maintain an open communication flow between management and its employees, the company implemented regular employee engagement initiatives such as “Tea with the Senior Leadership” and town hall sessions. All employees also had the opportunity to voice their feedback through the SingPost Voice of Employees Survey, which formed the basis for SingPost’s solutions for workplace issues. Additionally, SingPost rolled out various recognition programs starting in 2011 to reward the best performers from the respective regional bases. The awards were accompanied by monetary incentives to help motivate employees and to promote higher worker retention and loyalty.[[17]](#endnote-17)

Current Service Operations

SingPost categorized its mail and parcel delivery services into three areas: sending within Singapore, sending overseas, and receiving mail and parcels. Within the category of receiving mail and parcels, SingPost offered various services designed to meet the needs of different customers. Customers could choose to hold and manage confidential mail and parcels, to avoid missing delivery if they could not be home during the delivery time.[[18]](#endnote-18)

Customers could ensure that they would not miss the delivery of their parcel by using SingPost’s new service called Pick Own Parcel Station (POPStation). Customers could collect their parcels from one of many SingPost POPStations at any time by using a single-use code. A similar service, Locker Alliance, partnered with widespread parcel lockers and collection points to allow customers to collect parcels at their convenience. [[19]](#endnote-19)

Rather than simply leaving mail or parcels at the customer’s doorstep, SingPost employees would hold the item for the customer if no one was available to receive it. Customers could then request either a second attempt of a missed delivery or redirection of the item to a more convenient post office for easier pickup.[[20]](#endnote-20)

Customers who preferred more management options for the delivery of their confidential mail could use a service called Hold Mail Service, which would hold mail securely until it could be delivered in person.[[21]](#endnote-21)

REPORTED INCIDENTS

Overview

Originally, providing effective last mile delivery was considered SingPost’s unique competitive advantage. Over time, however, that standard became an expected service by all customers. Therefore, in 2018 and in early 2019, SingPost received unfavourable publicity when various events were seen as failures in basic service operations. The incidents included mail being left on mailboxes, discarded parcels, false missed-delivery notices,[[22]](#endnote-22) valuable parcels left on the doorstep, and forged recipients’ signatures on the proof of receipt. When these service failure incidents were ignored, rather than being promptly addressed and rectified, negative attention was cast on the company. SingPost was blamed for lack of accountability and explanation, and customer complaints were met with generic responses. [[23]](#endnote-23)

Undelivered Letters Discarded, Undistributed Flyers Concealed

In January 2019, an Ang Mo Kio resident discovered stacks of unopened letters inside a trash bin, and promptly proceeded to share the incident via a series of photos on Facebook. The 30–40 letters that were discovered included official mail from government agencies such as the Land Transport Authority and the Community Health Assistance Scheme.[[24]](#endnote-24) Under Singapore’s *Postal Services Act*, it was an offence for any officer, employee, or agent of postal licensees to destroy or discard any postal article.[[25]](#endnote-25)

After an internal investigation by SingPost, the police took over the case, which led to the eventual arrest in late January 2019 a 29-year-old postal worker.[[26]](#endnote-26) SingPost issued a Facebook apology to residents of the affected housing blocks and offered assistance for the inconveniences caused by the lost mail.[[27]](#endnote-27)

The Ang Mo Kio resident’s Facebook post showing the discarded mail was shared more than 6,000 times. People took to social media platforms and online forums to voice their disapproval.[[28]](#endnote-28) Most people who commented expressed concern for what they perceived as an unnecessarily heavy workload for SingPost employees, which was considered a sign of deeper underlying problems within the company’s operations. However, some comments suggested that the responsible postal worker should be punished. The discussion thread branched out to personal anecdotes of negative experiences with SingPost. One post described an event in which a SingPost customer service officer was unable to provide the address for the SingPost main office because the customer service function had been outsourced to India.[[29]](#endnote-29)

Around that time, another negative incident plagued SingPost. A small business owner who had paid S$7,000 for the distribution of advertising flyers, contacted SingPost to enquire about the status of his order and was sent photos showing the successful distribution of his flyers in various mailboxes. However, the photos were later proven to have been digitally manipulated. On closer inspection, all flyers in the photos shared the same unique identification marks, which proved the successful distribution of only one flyer. It was alleged that SingPost staff had manipulated the photos to imply that they had completed the customer’s order, without having actually performed their job. After the business owner contacted the police, SingPost reacted by sanctioning the staff members responsible. SingPost received a strong critical response from angry consumers, who felt that SingPost had intended to purposely mislead its customers, had the fraudulent photos not been discovered.[[30]](#endnote-30)

Issues with undelivered advertising flyers had occurred before. In February 2018, a SingPost worker was confronted by a customer who had reason to believe that his flyers were not being distributed, after various bundles of letters were found unopened in nearby trash bins.[[31]](#endnote-31) Videos documenting the tense exchange showed the SingPost employee complaining that he was overworked, having to deliver over 2,600 letters per day.[[32]](#endnote-32) He also claimed that he was not compensated for overtime work and had no time to visit the doctor for his sore ankle. SingPost responded by dismissing the worker for failing to perform his duties.[[33]](#endnote-33)

Leaving Failed Delivery Notifications without Waiting

A December 2018 Facebook video depicted yet another negative account involving a SingPost worker. The video seemed to show the worker at the customer’s door for only a few seconds, leaving a missed-delivery notice, and going back to his vehicle before the customer could answer the door. When confronted, the worker claimed he waited more than 20 minutes.[[34]](#endnote-34)

SingPost investigated the event and issued a statement claiming that the worker had followed SingPost procedures by knocking several times without response and leaving a missed-delivery notice after waiting more than 45 seconds. Regarding the worker’s claim that he had waited 20 minutes, SingPost explained that the worker was not fluent in English and was thus unable to express himself properly. The incident also raised the issue of whether 45 seconds was sufficient time for customers to set aside their daily routine to answer the door. [[35]](#endnote-35)

Various other Facebook users joined the online discussion with their own unpleasant encounters with lost or delayed packages and letters. One user claimed that valuable parcels had been left outside the door, apparently having been signed for, despite the signature not belonging to any family members. Another user captured a SingPost worker on video leaving regular mail together with a failed delivery slip, despite not carrying any parcels.[[36]](#endnote-36)

SERVICE RECOVERY

On January 14, 2019, after a series of service lapses, SingPost issued a public apology on its Facebook page. The company explained that approximately 3 million items were processed each day, and the year-end was a very busy peak season for all staff members, requiring 20 extra doorstep deliveries each day. Nevertheless, SingPost promised to review operational procedures vigorously to increase the quality of its service.[[37]](#endnote-37) The company also announced that the workers who were involved in negative incidents had been dismissed.[[38]](#endnote-38) The Facebook post received responses from outraged customers who complained of unsatisfactory experiences. Others criticized the company for SingPost blaming peak periods, when the issues had persisted for some time.[[39]](#endnote-39)

Changes in Operation Procedures

On February 7, 2019, in response to the 2018 incidents, SingPost announced immediate measures as part of a broad review of its postal operations.[[40]](#endnote-40) The measures were aimed at solving the most pressing issues within three to six months. One of the most pressing issues was the recent increase in workload, resulting from the rapid rise of e-commerce, especially in seasonal periods. SingPost planned to employ 100 additional workers to cope with rising delivery volumes, and to increase the number of dedicated parcel collection counters and workers at post offices.[[41]](#endnote-41) The company also planned to work with government agencies and the Union of Telecoms Employees of Singapore to upgrade worker skills and alleviate the large workloads.[[42]](#endnote-42)

SingPost also addressed remuneration as part of its salary structure review. As of February 1, 2019, workers would receive higher pay with incentives for successful deliveries of trackable items to the customer’s doorstep.[[43]](#endnote-43) Mail delivery shifts would also be extended to weekday evenings and Saturdays to reduce missed deliveries. Those workers who volunteered for the new shifts would receive overtime pay. SingPost also aimed to improve service levels at its core mail delivery service. Coutts announced other longer-term measures to address other issues raised. SingPost would also introduce new technology and infrastructure to improve the delivery process according to a specific timeline (see Exhibit 3).[[44]](#endnote-44)

Other Implications

In February 2019, Infocomm Media Development Authority fined SingPost S$100,000 for a series of service lapses that occurred in 2017. In May 2017, SingPost had failed to achieve the standard of delivering at least 99 per cent of local basic letters within the Central Business District by the next working day. Later in the same year, it had failed to achieve both 100 per cent delivery of local basic letters within two working days for a period of five months and 100 per cent delivery of registered mail for a period of three months. Although the February 2019 penalty was the heaviest fine ever levied by the national agency,[[45]](#endnote-45) concerns were raised in Singapore’s Parliament regarding the adequacy of the fine, considering that nine service failures had been recorded in one year.[[46]](#endnote-46)

Growth in E-commerce: Three-Year Transformation Plan

In addition to improving its operational procedures to offer reliable postal services, SingPost sought to develop new revenue streams from the growing e-commerce trend. To strengthen its foothold in the e-commerce logistic market and counter the drop in domestic postal service, SingPost developed a transformation strategy for its postal and logistic networks, to be rolled out progressively over a period of three years. With a goal to become the regional last mile delivery and urban logistic partner of choice, SingPost built up new capabilities on its existing e-commerce logistic solutions, such as front-end website management, warehouse and fulfillment, international freight forwarding, and last mile delivery.[[47]](#endnote-47)

The logistics service Last Mile Platform was set up in 2018 to synchronize various last mile delivery solutions (e.g., courier service, collection points, and parcel lockers) into one platform. The platform was expected to enable enhanced flexibility, convenience, and control for customers. It merged services from multiple retailers and logistic providers from across Southeast Asia, allowing customers to obtain their digital purchases from any last mile service provider on the network.[[48]](#endnote-48)

MOVING FORWARD

By early April 2019, SingPost’s immediate operational changes were still in progress. Although the company did not have a monopoly in the postal market, it held the only public postal licence in Singapore and had the largest market share.[[49]](#endnote-49) Therefore, SingPost’s service was crucial, and fundamental changes needed to be implemented. Despite the measures that were in progress, SingPost needed to do to more to address deeply rooted operational issues and regain consumer confidence over the long term.

EXHIBIT 1: SINGapore POST Ltd. FINANCIAL REPORT, 2016/17 to 2017/18   
Fourth Quarter and Full Year

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | **Q4**  **FY 17/18**  **(S$ ’000)** | **Q4**  **FY 16/17**  **(S$ ’000)** | **Variance (%)** | **Full Year**  **FY 17/18**  **(S$ ’000)** | **Full year**  **FY 16/17**  **(S$ ’000)** | **Variance (%)** |
| **Group results** |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| Revenue | 367,536 | 323,757 | 13.5 | 1,464,099 | 1,347,764 | 8.6 |
| Rental and property related income | 13,926 | 8,807 | 58.1 | 47,499 | 36,574 | 29.9 |
| Total expenses | (354,596) | (317,515) | 11.7 | (1,388,163) | (1,249,340) | 11.1 |
| Operating profit before exceptional items | 31,407 | 26,607 | 18.0 | 143,506 | 147,010 | (2.4) |
| Exceptional items | 8,680 | (93,058) | N.M. | 14,522 | (88,653) | N.M. |
| Operating profit | 40,087 | (66,451) | N.M. | 158,028 | 58,357 | 170.8 |
| Net profit | 23,946 | (65,246) | N.M. | 126,400 | 33,403 | 278.4 |
| Underlying net profit | 15,266 | 21,368 | (28.6) | 104,951 | 115,612 | (9.2) |
| Earnings per share (cents) | 0.90 | (3.03) |  | 4.92 | 0.85 |  |
| Dividend per share (cents | 2.0 | 0.5 |  | 3.5 | 3.5 |  |

Note: Q4 = fourth quarter; FY = financial year; N.M. = not meaningful; S$ = Singaporean dollar; S$1 = US$0.74 in March 2019.

Source: Singapore Post Ltd., *Advancing through Transformation, Annual Report 2017/18*, accessed August 15, 2019, www.singpost.com/sites/default/files/publications\_file/2018/06/Singpost\_AR201718.pdf; Singapore Post Ltd., *Delivering the Future, Annual Report 2016/17*, accessed August 15, 2019, www.singpost.com/sites/default/files/publications\_file/2017/08/Full%20AR%20FY1617.pdf.

EXHIBIT 2: SINGapore POST Ltd. FINANCIAL REPORT, 2017/18 to 2018/19   
Third Quarter and 9 MONTHS

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | **Q3**  **FY 18/19**  **(S$ ’000)** | **Q3**  **FY 17/18**  **(S$ ’000)** | **Variance (%)** | **9M**  **FY 18/19**  **(S$ ’000)** | **9M**  **FY 17/18**  **(S$ ’000)** | **Variance (%)** |
| **Group results** |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| Revenue | 441,375 | 410,390 | 7.6 | 1,182,631 | 1,131,508 | 4.5 |
| Operating expenses | (398,318) | (366,162) | 8.8 | (1,063,727) | (1,022,361) | 4.0 |
| Profit on operating activities | 42,227 | 46,143 | (8.5) | 121,360 | 114,841 | 5.7 |
| Share of profit/loss of associated items | 17 | 951 | (98.2) | (7,092) | 3,069 | N.M. |
| Exceptional items | 31,825 | 925 | N.M. | 22,919 | 5,842 | N.M. |
| Net profit | 50,202 | 43,416 | 15.6 | 94,066 | 103,661 | (9.3) |
| Underlying net profit | 32,882 | 35,561 | (7.5) | 85,652 | 90,892 | (5.8) |
| Earnings per share (cents) | 2.06 | 1.75 |  | 3.67 | 4.07 |  |
| Dividend per share (cents | 0.5 | 0.5 |  | 1.5 | 1.5 |  |

Note: Note: Q3 = third quarter; FY = financial year; N.M. = not meaningful; S$ = Singaporean dollar; S$1 = US$0.74 in March 2019.

Source: Singapore Post Ltd., *Advancing through Transformation, Annual Report 2017/18*, accessed August 15, 2019, www.singpost.com/sites/default/files/publications\_file/2018/06/Singpost\_AR201718.pdf; Singapore Post Ltd., “SingPost Third Quarter Net Profit Rises 15.6 percent to $50.2 million,” February 1, 2019, accessed August 20, 2019, www.singpost.com/about-us/news-releases/SingPost-third-quarter-net-profit-rises-156-cent-s502-million.

EXHIBIT 3: SINGapore POST Ltd. Timeline of Events

Appointed new chief executive, Mr. Paul William Coutts.

February 7: SingPost announced immediate measures to be taken in an attempt to resolve the most pressing issues in the next 3–6 months.

Late January: A 29-year-old mail carrier was arrested for discarding mail.

January: An Ang Mo Kio resident found stacks of unopened letters inside a rubbish bin.

January 14: SingPost made a public apology on its Facebook page for the series of service failures.

December: A Facebook viral recount stated that a user was unable to answer the door in time to receive his parcel, as the SingPost mail carrier knocked only a few times, and further miscommunication issues arose.

May: SingPost was found to have breached the Singapore Exchange’s Listing Rules.

February: SingPost mail carriers threw neatly bundled flyers in several dustbins, and the flyers were subsequently discovered by the customer.

Note: SingPost = Singapore Post Ltd.

Source: Compiled and created by authors from Marissa Lee, *“*Paul William Coutts: SingPost Fills CEO Post after One Year Following Wolfgang Baier Resignation,” *Straits Times*, December 30, 2016, accessed March 16, 2019, www.straitstimes.com/business/singpost-fills-ceo-post-after-one-year; Marissa Lee, “SGX Raps SingPost for Breaching Listing Rules,” *Straits Times*, May 5, 2017, accessed August 20, 2019, www.straitstimes.com/business/sgx-raps-singpost-for-breaching-listing-rules; SingPost Apologizes over Former Employee Caught Discarding Mail,” Yahoo! News, February 12, 2018, accessed March 17, 2019, https://sg.news.yahoo.com/singpost-apologises-ex-staff-caught-discarding-mail-091405407.html; Joshua Lee, “Missed Delivery Incident: SingPost Says Postman Waited 45 Seconds,” *Mothership*, December 28, 2018, accessed March 17, 2019, https://mothership.sg/2018/12/SingPost-andy-lau-postman-missed-delivery; Nicole Chang, “SingPost Delivers Apology for Recent ‘Service Failures,’” Channel NewsAsia, January 15, 2019, accessed March 28, 2019, www.channelnewsasia.com/news/singapore/SingPost-apology-fail-delivery-mail-package-says-sorry-11123416; Nurul Azliah Aripin, “Postman Arrested after Ang Mo Kio Residents Report Unopened Mail Found in Rubbish Bin,” Channel News Asia, January 29, 2019, accessed March 16, 2019, www.channelnewsasia.com/news/singapore/SingPost-postman-arrested-mail-in-rubbish-bin-ang-mo-kio-11178184; Singapore Post Ltd., “SingPost Announces Immediate Measures to Improve Service Quality,” news release, February 7, 2019, accessed March 17, 2019, www.SingPost.com/about-us/news-releases/SingPost-announces-immediate-measures-improve-service-quality.

Endnotes

1. This case has been written on the basis of published sources only. Consequently, the interpretation and perspectives presented in this case are not necessarily those of Singapore Post Ltd. or any of its employees. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
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