Postmaster General predicts nearly 20 percent jump in shipping volume.

’Tis the season, and for the 237th year the U.S. Postal Service is ready for the best holiday ever! with 365 million packages expected to be delivered this holiday season–a 20 percent increase over 2011.

The postal service projects the record-breaking increase in its competitive package business due to consumers’ growing fondness for shopping online. In total, nearly 18 billion cards, letters and packages will be delivered.

“This is one of the most exciting and busiest times of the year for the postal service, whether you’re sending a holiday card to Kentucky or military care package to Afghanistan, our employees do what it takes to process and deliver every single one,” said Patrick Donahoe, Postmaster General.

The busiest mailing day is Dec. 17, when more than 655 million pieces of mail are expected to be processed–compared to 538 on an average day. The busiest delivery day for letters will be Dec. 19 and the busiest day for packages Dec. 20.

To help gear up for the holiday rush, postal staff at the National Operations Center report on Dec. 4 for around-the-clock duty.

With more than one million visitors a day to usps.com, between Thanksgiving and New Year’s Eve, and nearly 400,000 customers expected to print shipping labels using Click-N-Ship on Dec. 19, the postal service is sure to be the best shipping deal in Anytown, USA. Beat the Rush–Mail Early

To help customers beat the rush and know the all-important mailing and shipping deadlines, Donahoe stressed that mailing early is key and advised customers to take note of the following dates:

Mail-by Dates

• Dec. 10 Priority Mail Military
• Dec. 11 Express Mail International
• Dec. 14 Parcel Post
• Dec. 17 Global Express Guaranteed
• Dec. 20 First-Class Mail
• Dec. 21 Priority Mail
• Dec. 22 Express Mail

Tips for Mailing

Given the busy season ahead, here are a few simple tips sure to help customers avoid those holiday hassles and keep the season merry.

• Confirm addresses. Print addresses clearly and in all CAPS and be sure to include all address elements–apartment numbers, suite numbers and directional information for streets. Include both “to” and “from” information on packages–and only on one side. Never guess a ZIP Code. Visit usps.com to find all ZIP codes.

• Choose the right box. Select a box that is strong enough to protect the contents. Leave space for cushioning inside. Do not reuse mailing boxes–they weaken in the shipping process.

• Pack delicately. Cushion contents with shredded or rolled newspaper, bubble wrap or foam peanuts. Plain air-popped popcorn also is good for cushioning–it’s inexpensive and environmentally friendly. Pack contents tightly. Always use tape that is designed for shipping.

Do not use wrapping paper, string, masking tape, duct tape or cellophane tape.