Era Ends: Western Union Stops Sending Telegrams

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After 145 years, Western Union has quietly stopped sending telegrams.

On the company's web site, if you click on "Telegrams" in the left-side navigation bar, you're taken to a page that ends a technological era with about as little fanfare as possible:

"Effective January 27, 2006, Western Union will discontinue all Telegram and Commercial Messaging services. We regret any inconvenience this may cause you, and we thank you for your loyal patronage. If you have any questions or concerns, please contact a customer service representative."

The decline of telegram use goes back at least to the 1980s, when long-distance telephone service became cheap enough to offer a viable alternative in many if not most cases. Faxes didn't help. Email could be counted as the final nail in the coffin.

Western Union has not failed. It long ago refocused its main business to make money transfers for consumers and businesses. Revenues are now $3 billion annually. It's now called Western Union Financial Services, Inc. and is a subsidiary of First Data Corp.

The world's first telegram was sent on May 24, 1844 by inventor Samuel Morse. The message, "What hath God wrought," was transmitted from Washington to Baltimore. In a crude way, the telegraph was a precursor to the Internet in that it allowed rapid communication, for the first time, across great distances.

Western Union goes back to 1851 as the Mississippi Valley Printing Telegraph Company. In 1856 it became the Western Union Telegraph Company after acquisition of competing telegraph systems. By 1861, during the Civil War, it had created a coast-to-coast network of lines.
Other company highlights:

- 1866: Introduced the first stock ticker.
- 1871: Introduced money transfers.
- 1884: Became one of the original 11 stocks tracked by the Dow Jones Average.
- 1914: Introduced the first consumer charge card.
- 1964: Began using a transcontinental microwave beam to replace land lines.
- 1974: Launched Westar I, the first U.S. dedicated communications satellite.

On Jan. 26, the last day you could send a telegram, First Data announced it would spin Western Union off as an independent, publicly traded company.

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