

Testing the Limits

A light-hearted look at the delivery practices of the U.S. Postal Service

By Jeff Van Bueren

Our team of investigators has long been a genuine admirer of the U.S. Postal Service, which gives amazingly reliable service, so we decided to test the delivery limits of its immense system. We knew that an item, say, a saucepan, normally would be in a package because of USPS concerns of entanglement in its automated machinery. But what if the items were not wrapped? How patient are postal employees? How honest? How sentimental? In short, how eccentric a behavior on the part of the sender would still result in successful mail delivery?

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We sent a variety of unpackaged items to US destinations, appropriately stamped for weight and size as well as a few items packaged as noted. We sent items that loosely fit into the following general categories: valuable, sentimental, unwieldy, pointless, potentially suspicious and disgusting. We discovered that although some items were never delivered, most of the objects of even highly unusual form did get delivered as long as the items had a definitely ample value of stamps attached. The Postal Service appears to be amazingly tolerant of the foibles of the public and seems occasionally willing to relax some specific postal regulations.

Our research began by obtaining and reviewing relevant information on USPS regulations and discussing, in a limited and very hypothetical manner, the planned project with USPS' customer service. A group of mailable objects was then assembled, stamped with abundant postage by weight and size and mailed at public postal collection boxes (when possible to cram the object through the box's aperture) or at postal stations (if possible). A card was strapped to the object with duct tape or stranded strapping tape and postage was affixed to the card, except as otherwise noted below.

Senders and receivers were interchangeable — the mailings were double-masked to conceal the identity of our mailing specialists, and gloves were used to prepare the mailings (to avoid fingerprints). In no case was a return address given, and each object either went forward to its destination or was lost in follow-up. An object was considered lost if it was not received within the 180-day study parameter. All objects were sent First Class using five-digit ZIP Codes to actual domestic addresses, and the number of days to delivery was recorded (excluding postal holidays). The condition of the object upon receipt was also recorded.

Materials and Findings

The items we mailed fall into several broad classifications, which are described here.

Valuable items — items that would provoke stealing or had some apparent business or financial worth:

- Letter with incorrect stamp location (stamp placed at top left corner) — A formal business-style letter to a formal business name, in high-quality envelope. Days to delivery, 21. The stamp was crossed out by hand and the top right corner of the envelope was stamped with, "evidence postage was affixed, one rate okay."
- One dollar bill — sealed in clear plastic with label attached and address and postage. Days to delivery, six. Also, a \$20 bill was sent, the number of days to delivery were four.
- Football — days to delivery, six. The postal carrier was talkative and asked recipient about the scores of various current games. Postal carrier noted that mail must be wrapped.
- Pair of new, expensive tennis shoes — strapped together with duct tape. Days to delivery, seven. When shoes were picked up at the station, laces were tied tightly together with difficult-to-remove knot. The postal clerk noted that mail must be wrapped.

Sentimental items:

- Rose — postage and address were attached to a card that was tied to the stem. Delivery to doorstep took three days; it was beat up but the rose bud was still attached.
- Molar tooth — mailed in clear plastic box. It made a nice rattling sound. Repackaged in padded mailer by unknown individual, and the postage and address had been transferred to the outside of the new packaging. A handwritten note read, "Please be advised that human remains may not be transported through the mail, but we assumed this to be of sentimental value and made an exception in your case." Days to delivery, 14.
- Sound-emitting toy — monkey-in-box toy that upon shaking shouted, "Let me out of here! Help! Let me out of here!" Addressed in big letters to Little Jobnnee. The toy was equipped with a new battery. Delivery at doorstep in six days.

Unwieldy items — items that would be a challenge to handle:

- Hammer — a card was strapped to hammer handle and an extra-large amount of postage was attached. It was never received.
- Feather duster — a card with postage and address was attached by wire to the handle. Days to notice of delivery, six. The postal clerk at the station commented that mail must be wrapped.
- Ski — large amount of postage was affixed to a card that was attached to the ski. The ski was slipped into a bin of postage that was being loaded into a truck behind a station (a collaborating staff member created a verbal disturbance to momentarily distract the postal worker's attention). Notice of postage due received, 11 days. Upon pickup at the station, the clerk and supervisor consulted a book of postage regulations together for two minutes and 40 seconds before deciding on additional postage fees to assess. Clerk asked if mailing specialist knew how this had been mailed; our recipient said she did not know. The postal clerk also noted that mail must be wrapped.
- Never-opened small bottle of spring water — we observed the street corner box surreptitiously the following day upon mail collection. After puzzling briefly over this item, the postal carrier removed the mailing label and drank the contents of the bottle over the course of a few blocks as he worked his route.
- Helium balloon — the balloon was attached to a weight. The address was written on the balloon with magic marker and no postage was affixed. Our operative argued strongly that he should be charged a negative postage and refunded the postal fees because the transport airplane would actually be lighter as a result of our postal item. This line of reasoning merely received a laugh from the clerk. The balloon was refused and the reason given was transportation of helium was not wrapped.

Pointless items — items that looked like a prank:

- Can of soup — never received.
- Coconut — fresh green coconut containing juice mailed in Hawaii. Delivery occurred at doorstep, 10 days.
- Brick — mailed at street corner box with ample postage for weight. It was never received.
- Lemon — never received.
- Small bag of kitty litter — never received.
- Bald tire — the card with postage was strapped to the tire but it was refused at the station.

Suspicious items — for reasons given:

- Sound-emitting toy — same toy as under Sentimental above but wrapped securely in brown

- paper. It was never received.
- Street sign — conceivably a stolen item or illegal possession. Notice of attempted delivery received, nine days. It was handed over at station with comment that mail must be wrapped.
- Box of sand — packaged in transparent plastic box to be visible to postal employees. It was sent to give an impression of potentially hiding something. The plastic box had obviously been opened before delivery and then securely taped shut. Delivery was without comment at doorstep, seven days.
- Wrapped coconut — wrapped in brown paper. It made an ample sloshing sound and round shape seemed suspicious. Attempted to mailing at station, however, the clerk requested identification of object. When told it was a coconut, clerk informed our mailing specialist that a certificate from the US Department of Agriculture would be required before it could cross state lines. It was not mailed.
- Wrapped brick — wrapped in brown paper and posted in street corner box with same amount of postage as was strapped to unwrapped brick. The extreme weight for the size made package seem suspicious. Notice of attempted delivery received, 16 days. Upon pickup at station, our mailing specialist received a plastic bag containing broken and pulverized remnants of brick. Inside was a small piece of paper with a number code on it. Our research indicates that this was some type of U.S. Drug Enforcement Agency release slip. The clerk made our mailing specialist sign a form for receipt.

Disgusting items — items that are malicious, potentially infectious, smelly, etc.:

- Deer tibia — our mailing specialist received many strange looks from both postal clerks and members of the public standing in line when he picked it up at the station after nine days. The postal clerk put on rubber gloves before handling the bone, inquired if our researcher were a "cultist" and commented that mail must be wrapped.
- Large wheel of cheese — the cheese was already ripe (rancid) at the time of mailing. It was mailed in a cardboard box. The cheese had oiled its way through the bottom of the cardboard box by the time of pick up, which was eight days. The box had been placed in a plastic bag.
- Dead fish, old seaweed, etc. — mailed in cardboard box. Notice to pick up at station after seven days. The postal supervisor warned our mailing specialist that he could be fined for mail service abuse, even as a recipient, should this happen again.

First, this experiment yielded a 64% delivery rate (18 of 28), an almost two-thirds success rate. For our purposes, delivery constituted some type of independent handling by the USPS and subsequent contact regarding the object, regardless of whether we got to see or keep the object or whether it arrived whole. This is astounding, considering the nature of some of the items sent. This compares with a 0% rate of receipt of fully wrapped packages from certain countries of the developing world such as Peru, Turkey and Egypt. Admittedly, those were international mailings and thus not totally comparable, nevertheless, the disparity is striking.

Second, the delivery involved the collaboration of sequences of postal workers, not simply lone operatives. The USPS appears to have some collective sense of humor and might in fact here be displaying the rudiments of organic bureaucratic intelligence.

Finally, our investigative team felt remorse for some of its experimental efforts, most particularly the category disgusting. We sought out as many of the USPS employees who had (involuntarily) been involved in the experiment as we could identify and gave them each a small box of chocolates. We, as all scientists, owe a debt of gratitude to these civil servants. Without them, we would have had but little success in pushing the envelope.

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