

The Street

How to Escape a Holiday Mail Mess

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NEW YORK ([MainStreet](#)) -- Small businesses have enough to think about during the busy holiday season; worrying if a carrier is going to be able to accommodate shipping needs shouldn't be one of them.

Steve Leavitt, COO of [Unishippers](#), a third-party shipping adviser to small businesses, says that because commercial shipping orders go through some of the same carriers handling residential delivery, including **UPS**([UPS](#)) and **FedEx**([FDS](#)), businesses should prepare for the added carrier responsibilities.



Unishippers acts like a liaison between small businesses and carriers. It has relationships with more than 30 carriers in which it has secured discounted rates for business-to-business customers whether it's for ground, freight, international or express-type deliveries.

Leavitt provided some best practices when shipping large quantities during the busy holiday season.

How does Unishippers help small businesses with commercial shipping needs?

Leavitt: Unishippers has for the last 25 years worked with small businesses. Generally we consider small to midsize companies as anybody with less than 100 employees. We understand what the carriers expect so we can communicate that back out to small businesses.

We provide some of the benefits and service and pricing that the large businesses get that the small customer generally can't. The second thing that we provide is invoicing and flexible credit terms that oftentimes a small business can't get from a carrier.

A lot of small businesses also have small, multiple branches, so we can implement our program over a section of these branch offices to make sure they all get the same pricing. We'll consolidate the invoices where they want it. We're going to really provide them with an advocacy. We know the buttons to push at the carrier.

A few key terms:

- **Parcel or small package:** generally associated with professional services needs such as title companies, car dealerships, mortgage services, etc.
- **Less-than-truckload (LTL):** generally considered small freight packages (six or fewer pallets or skids)
- **Full truckload (FL):** generally considered large freight, needing an entire trailer or truck.

What are some key items small businesses should keep in mind as they set up a shipping program?

Leavitt: The biggest thing that a customer needs to do to ensure their packages and shipments actually get there on time is double-check ZIP codes and addresses. The carriers this time of year are so busy that rather than go and find the [address] they just put it back on the truck and it goes back to the terminal, which just delays the shipment.

The next thing after address is to make sure you put a phone number on so the delivery person can easily get a hold of where it goes and route it properly.

Oftentimes people don't put the [exact] weight and size on the bill of weighting. They'll also put the wrong class. Putting the wrong weight and wrong class can also cause delays.

Those are pretty critical. If you do all that, the carrier can respond more appropriately in their pickup and delivery process.

Does the holiday season affect commercial shipments?

Leavitt: The carriers' capacity is maxed out, particularly UPS -- their planes are full, their trucks are full, and so the pickup and delivery people are very tired and worn out from the extra packages. All it takes is one driver out sick and it causes stress on everybody. There can be delays from that. In some markets there might be overcapacity. Where they would have offered two-day service it may take an extra day.

The driver is also less apt to take extra time [to fill out paperwork] if there is damage.

What should a small business do to prepare for the busy period?

Leavitt: Give yourself an extra day or two. If you know it has to be there by Friday, don't ship on Wednesday; ship it on Monday or Tuesday. The other thing to do would be to move up the time of day. If you normally want shipment picked up at 4 p.m. move it up an hour or two or three. Give the carrier a little more window. Make sure the package is properly packaged. Pallets are shrink wrapped to hold packages together; put a little extra wrap on them. Label each box. And check the carriers' [holiday] schedules.

[This year] on Christmas Eve and New Year's Eve, many carriers won't be picking up packages. UPS has limited Saturday service. Don't leave something until Friday at 5 p.m. and expect that UPS will have the manpower to come pick it up.

Will online retailer shipping affect small businesses?

Leavitt: Because more people are buying online, the capacity of the carrier, particularly with UPS and the U.S. Postal Service, their systems are getting maxed out. It's the same system that moves the [business to consumer] that moves the B2B. The same driver that's delivering to residential is also delivering to commercial. It just stretches their capacity.

It's a good thing for the economy and so we like that, but for small-business owners who are trying to ship to another business owner, it just maximizes the capacity to put all the packages on the truck and to deliver all the packages.

And what about the cuts from the U.S. Postal Service? How will that affect small businesses that ship?

Leavitt: It will absolutely impact what we call deferred shipping -- shipping that UPS [and others] do on two-day, three-day and even overnight. Not a lot of small businesses use the USPS, but this will drive more businesses to use UPS and FedEx. It will have an impact on the capacity issues. Can they handle more shipments that get moved from the USPS? I don't know. It will be an interesting development to see how the systems' capacities will get impacted by what the USPS does.

We really don't know what all those changes are yet. Unishippers understands the small-business world -- they can at least help them understand what the changes are and if it impacts them, their employees or company.

-- Written by Laurie Kulikowski in New York.