

Small and Home-Based Business — Packaging for Safe Shipping

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AT-13-01

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Online and mail order sales are a major segment of the retail market. Many people like to shop on line or by mail because they save travel time and are able shop at their convenience. In addition, it is easy to compare merchandise, and a greater array of merchandise may be available.

However, the increasing presence of the internet in the retail market has slowed industry growth as e-commerce websites increasingly poach customers by offering greater convenience and quicker transactions. According to e-commerce statistics from 2009 to 2012, the number of online buyers in the United States has only been rising: from 132 million to more than 154 million. Industry forecasters predict more than 170 million people in the United States alone will be buying products online by 2015.

Whether you are selling online or by mail order, these options increase access to customers and may increase your market potential, but they also add a new responsibility: packing goods to withstand the bumps, drops and jars of shipping. Keeping package handling issues in mind, it essential to package your products properly to ensure they arrive in good condition. The way your merchandise arrives tells your customer how much you care about quality and may determine whether or not the customer orders from your business again. That's why it is so important to package and ship your merchandise correctly.

Package for shipping

Shipping is big business. To be successful, shippers have to be efficient and prompt. Therefore, packages are subject to various forces, stacked into trucks, and transported over roads, paved and unpaved, that may be in poor condition. Contents of packages are subject to shock (dropping or bumping), to compression (stacked on top and under others) and to vibration (road conditions). Proper cushioning materials, strong boxes and appropriate closure materials help protect your goods during shipment.

How fragile is the item to be shipped? Not only glass and fresh food items need to be packed carefully; consider also that wood can crack, metal can bend or dent, fabric can wrinkle, and corners on objects can be damaged.

Placing an item in a tight fitting box does not provide sufficient room for cushioning materials. Instead, carefully protect items with cushioning materials, and then place in a corrugated box of adequate size that has sufficient cushioning (3 inches on all four sides). If the item is fragile, place the box inside a second box to provide additional protection.

Four packaging rules

The United Parcel Service (UPS)* is a common carrier used throughout the United States and the world. They have established guidelines for packaging that have contributed to their established reputation as a safe, reliable service. Regardless of the carrier used, following these guidelines will help to ensure the successful shipping and delivery of your goods.

1. Use a corrugated carton designed for shipping

Use packing containers that are in good, rigid condition, with all flaps intact. Select a carton large enough to allow room for adequate cushioning material on all sides of the product. If you reuse a carton, ensure it is in good condition with no punctures, tears, rips or corner damage. To avoid confusion remove all previous shipping information. New corrugated cartons can be purchased from suppliers of paperboard boxes. They are also available from most moving companies or rental outlets. Boxes may also be purchased from companies whose business is mailing for the public.

2. Use adequate cushioning material to protect the contents

If more than one fragile item is packed, they must not touch each other or the corners or sides of the carton as this will help to reduce shock or impact. It is a good idea to wrap the item(s) in plain white tissue paper before adding cushioning materials to protect items from discoloration from the packaging materials. Several kinds of cushioning material are available with a few listed below:

- Heavy brown grocery bags provide inexpensive cushioning material. Crumple them and stuff them around the item to be shipped.
- Old newspaper is also inexpensive or free (shredded newspaper may be available from your local bank). However, newspaper ink is highly unstable and may come off onto anything it touches.
- Unprinted newsprint may be available from your local newspaper office.
- Bubble wrap is more expensive, but very effective in protecting items.
- Styrofoam bits also make effective cushions. Be sure to reuse them whenever possible.

Be alert for other sources of free cushioning materials. If a local business receives but does not ship fragile items, they may be happy to pass their cushioning materials on to you. Plastic bubble-wrap and Styrofoam bits, except for the new Eco-Foam type, do not biodegrade, so it is important to reuse them as much as possible. Newspaper, even shredded or crumpled, can usually be recycled when it can no longer be reused.

Pack several inches of cushioning materials in the bottom of the carton. Then, wrap items separately and place them in the center of the carton. The further you keep fragile articles away from the corners and sides, the less chance there is of damage.

Stuff cushioning material firmly around, over, and between the items to ensure they are properly protected. Shake the box to be sure that nothing rattles and to settle the packing material. Add more cushioning material, if necessary.

3. **Use proper materials for closing the package**

To ensure that your package is securely sealed, it is important to sealing tape designed for shipping. There are other tapes available such as masking tape or cellophane tape; these tapes do not provide the strength necessary for good closures and may cause your package to open during transporting. Also, avoid using string or wrapping the box in paper. String may break causing your package to open while paper wrapping may tear if caught on automatic equipment or during handling. If the overwrap is lost, the address information may be lost with it making delivery impossible. Do not use staples — they could pop out if the package is subjected to shock.

To close a carton securely, use one of the strong tapes below, two inches or more in width.

- **Pressure sensitive plastic tape** is generally easiest to use because it will stick without water. Apply three strips of tape to both the top and bottom of the carton: one across where the flaps meet or overlap, and one on each end across the seam.
- **Water activated paper tape** should be at least 3-inches wide and 60 pound grade. Apply three strips to both the top and bottom of the carton as with pressure sensitive plastic tape above.
- **Water activated reinforced tape** includes reinforcing fibers for extra strength. Only two strips of this tape, across the top and bottom center seams, are necessary.

4. **Use proper labeling to ensure proper delivery**

Remove or black out any old label information as this may confuse the shipper. Place the label on the "top" of the carton — the most stable side of the box — not over seams or tape. If using packing slip information, place on the same side as the address label. Do not put labels on any other surface of the carton.

The address must include the ZIP Code of the receiver with the complete street address. When addressing to a P.O. Box or Rural Route destination, include the recipient's telephone number on the label. Include the apartment number for all multi-unit dwelling addresses.

If there is any possibility that the label might come off or that the writing might smear, cover it completely with a wide band of pressure sensitive, transparent tape but make sure it is readable.

Always include your complete return address with your ZIP Code and full street address. For added protection, place a duplicate label inside the package.

The U.S. Postal Service recommends that addresses be typed in all capital letters with no punctuation.

Unusual items

Some items require special consideration when being packaged for shipping. Protect pointed areas with tape; enclose paper in corrugated paper tubes; double-box fragile items. For help with unusual items, contact the shipping office in your area or make use of specialty mailing/packaging services. Their employees are experts in safe mailing procedures.

Other considerations

Individual carriers offer other services for the protection of your packages. Through the U.S. Postal Service you can buy insurance, up to a maximum of \$5,000 depending on declared value. USPS automatically insures all Express Mail for \$100. Insurance is not available on packages mailed parcel post. UPS automatically insures all packages for up to \$100 for no additional charge. Additional insurance is available at a nominal charge. Some carriers also offer COD (Cash on Delivery) service. This means that the recipient must pay for the goods and shipping when the package is delivered. Some form of delivery response information is available for a small fee from most carriers. This lets the sender know that the package was received. UPS offers AOD (Acknowledgment of Delivery); the U.S. Postal Service offers a return receipt for a fee on packages insured for at least \$51.

A variety of rapid delivery services is available from many carriers for additional charge. It is possible to guarantee that your package will be delivered the same day, the next day, or within two days.

No one carrier is always best. The most economical delivery for a given package will depend on the size, weight, destination and urgency of the package. You may wish to check with several carriers before deciding which to use. To cover the costs of rapid delivery, you could require that customers pay an additional fee for same-day or overnight delivery.

Remember, proper packaging is a vital step in mail order package delivery. Your business will be judged by the package when it arrives. If the contents are broken or torn, or if the package does not get there in a reasonable amount of time, your customers will consider it a reflection of your company, and they may decide not to do business with you in the future.

Size and weight limits

Many shipping companies have size and weight limitations. These may change so check with them if a package seems questionable.

United Parcel Service (UPS)

- **Weight** - Not more than 70 pounds.
- **Length** - Not more than 108 inches.
- **Length plus girth** - Not more than 130 inches.

If the weight is less than 25 pounds and the length plus girth exceeds 84 inches, the weight will be counted as 25 pounds. For special regulations on packages shipped within Texas, contact UPS.

Federal Express (FedEx)

- **Weight** - Not more than 150 pounds.
- **Length** - Not more than 119 inches.
- **Length plus girth** - Not more than 165 inches.

United States Post Office

- **Weight** - Not more than 70 pounds.
- **Length plus girth** - Not more than 108 inches.
- **Minimum** - Not less than 3.5 x 5 inches.

Checklist for safe packaging

- Rigid carton with flaps intact.
- Items wrapped separately.
- Adequate cushioning material.
- Strong tape designed for shipping.
- No string or paper overwrap.
- Single address label.
- A clear, complete delivery address.
- A clear, complete return address.
- Duplicate label inside carton.

***No endorsement of individual carriers is intended, nor is criticism implied of any carrier not mentioned.**

Adapted from: University of Missouri Extension Service's Home-Based Business — Packaging for Safe Shipping