

'Just' a Courier? Not Anymore!



“Being successful in a challenging economy means taking on tasks you might never have previously considered....”

By Diane Smith, CEO Runners, Inc.

The use of computers and the acceptance of digital signatures have obviously impacted the courier industry in a less-than-positive way. Many documents, forms and other materials that were once hand delivered are now transferred in digital format. With these changes, then, you're likely to be among those approximately 51,000 courier and messenger businesses in the United States wondering what the future holds for your small business.

In the Baltimore/Washington, D.C., metropolitan area, for example—where my company, Runners Inc., is located—successful courier companies have learned to address the need for changing their traditional courier services or risk going out of business. We now know that, to be competitive in today's vastly different courier environment, the ability to become a “specialist” in a service area

can make a difference between surviving, thriving and failing.

It's Not All Doom and Gloom

A report from the Bureau of Labor Statistics (The Occupational Outlook Handbook, 2010-11 Edition) projects the potential employment statistics for couriers and messengers in the United States and emphasizes the need for traditional courier services, as well:

“Little or no employment change is expected through 2018, and couriers and messengers held about 122,400 jobs in 2008. The need to replace workers who leave the occupation will create the majority of job openings, primarily in large urban areas.

“Some demand for courier and messenger services will continue to arise, especially for items that cannot be sent electronically, such as blueprints and other oversized materials, securities and passports. Couriers will also be required by medical and dental laboratories to pick up and deliver medical specimens and other materials.”

Obviously, these national employment projections depend on the government's future action and the ability of local, small courier companies to survive the resulting changes that will impact their businesses.

In the 23+ years that Runners Inc. has been in business, we've had to change our direction multiple times to remain competitive and meet the ever-changing needs of our clients. The courier industry is all we've known, and the only choice available to us was to roll with the changes instead of closing our doors, as many small courier companies have done. So what's been the foundation of our continuing success? Effective customer communications, a commitment to excellence in all we do, the flexibility to accept change and a willingness to take a risk. Did I mention long hours, hard work and a fierce determination to succeed?

Over the years, we discovered that by simply listening to our customers' needs, we could introduce a variety of new services that we never thought possible. Learning to provide “custom services” and supporting our customers' “headache jobs” revealed new opportunities. Along the way, we fostered customer loyalty and set ourselves apart from other courier companies. While we still provide traditional courier services, we've been able to transform our business into a “one-stop shop” to support our customers' unique needs. For example, when a customer calls with a service request that we don't provide or with which we are not familiar, we take immediate action to figure out how to help that client. If we simply cannot provide assistance, we try to find a reliable source to meet our customer's needs. Very often, our referral fosters customer loyalty and creates new opportunities for repeat future business in areas that we can support.

Along those lines, in 2005, after getting increasing requests from customers to provide storage of oversized items, we took a big financial risk; we invested in a 60,000-square-foot warehouse. Since then, we've developed a variety of skills related to this addition that allow us to provide custom services. Plus, we have invested in technology to handle more logistical projects. A few examples of the types of services we now provide, among others, include logistics, trucking/moving and courier services. If you haven't delved into these areas, take a cue from what we're doing to expand your business. Following are some details.

Logistics: Meeting Customers' Unique Needs

Runners Inc. has developed business in unique areas that make our customers' jobs easier. These services provide peace of mind and, eventually, become less of a luxury for our customers and more of a necessity. These jobs include:

Secure transport. We provide statewide pickup and consolidation of confidential educational test documents in sealed security containers.

Furniture distribution. Several retail establishments use our warehouse to receive, warehouse and deliver their furniture on demand.

Hotel renovation/construction. Many local hotels don't have onsite storage space for furniture and fixtures during renovation. We receive their items at our warehouse and provide just-in-time delivery to meet their construction schedules.

Pick-and-pack. A customer who imports products from Greece stores its items in our warehouse, and we provide pick-and-pack distribution services for it.

Furniture storage. An Internet company that sells antique furniture imported from France stores its inventory in our warehouse.

Ice-melt salt. We store ice-melt salt in our warehouse and deliver it on demand to local apartment complexes and building-management companies.

Local colleges. Over the summer, we pick up and store students' dorm furniture and boxed personal items for several local colleges. When college

resumes in the fall, we redeliver the items.

Trucking/Moving: Keeping Business in Motion

You don't have to be a moving company to provide moving services. We've discovered business in specific industry segments that doesn't require a lot of muscles or heavy lifting.

Moving services. We provide support for residential and small office moves, relocations and set-ups. We also store items in our warehouse between moves to accommodate a variety of schedules.

Trucking. In addition to local trucking, we provide out-of-state and same-day custom services.

Courier Services: From Cakes to Healthcare

Courier services continue to be a critical part of our business, though we now have less paperwork to deliver and more actual hard goods and similar products.

Custom cakes. We pick up, transport and deliver elaborate baked goods and multitier wedding cakes.

Food delivery. We pick up and deliver lunch for customers. Several local restaurants use our services to deliver and set up catering orders.

Proposals/bids/legal documents. Our services include the electronic receipt and assembly of documents and the delivery of extremely time-sensitive papers, often under a tight deadline.

Medical specimens. We maintain a bin of dry ice on our premises to support medical customers' needs and use couriers trained in industry-recommended procedures to safely transport and handle medical biohazards.

Over the years, we've certainly had our share of mishaps in creating new business. But we always look at these setbacks as teachable moments in our never-ending quest to avoid being another casualty of a large company takeover or, worse, going belly up. We continually strive for excellence. In those infrequent instances when we don't meet our customers' service expectations, we take immediate corrective action to ensure complete customer satisfaction. The courier industry is filled with challenges, yet new opportunities are there for the asking ... if you know what your customers want.

About the Author

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