

It's All in the Delivery

I was a little green when it came to wearing the brown

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Oh, come on, what can be so difficult about delivering a couple of packages?

Boy, was I wrong.

This whole "Brown" thing started out pretty black and white. I asked Dave Gomez, the United Parcel Service driver whose route includes my Walnut Creek neighborhood, if I could interview him.

Dave was flattered but had to get permission from his higher-ups, who invited me to go on a ride-along with him.

Are you kidding?

But before I could hop aboard Dave's truck, communication supervisor Rhoda Daclison-Dickey told me I would have to agree to two non-negotiable conditions. The first is that I had to undergo safety training because safety is always the company's No. 1 concern. And the second condition, I asked? I would have to wear the Brown.

Where do I sign up?

I thought my uniform would be delivered to my home via — what else? — UPS, but no. Two days before my ride, employment supervisor Dan Hurley came to my home with an array of shirts, trousers, jackets and hats for me — a one-color wardrobe makeover. Although Hurley said regulations required I wear a brown belt and brown shoes, I opted for no belt, pink Timberline boots and a pink silk scarf. After all, the boots were my most durable and comfortable shoes, and it was all about safety — and accessorizing.

Then, on the day of my ride along, I had to complete a course, under Dan's guidance, on how to safely enter and exit the truck when stopping to deliver packages. I also had to learn to strap myself in so I wouldn't fall out of a truck while riding with the doors open. I must have practiced getting on and off that truck at least a dozen times.

When I passed Dan's inspection on uniform and safety, we snapped a few photos, hugged goodbye and Dave and I took off.

Which brings us back to how hard can this be?

Oh, boy, is it hard.

Imagine if in the course of two hours you took an advanced level step aerobics class, followed by an hour at the Bar Method and then throw in some weight training for good measure. Let me tell you, that first step up is mighty high for someone who is only 5-foot-1. A week later I am still sore.

So let's put this in some perspective. On an average day, Dave works 10-12 hours, makes 170 stops and delivers 240 packages. Double that at Christmas. I, on the other hand, worked barely two hours, made just 20 stops and delivered a mere 35 packages -- and I have been on a heating pad for a week. Hard? Yeah, it's unbelievably hard.

It's not about carrying the weight of the packages, it was about everything else that goes with being a UPS driver: Getting in and out of the truck safely, opening closing people's gates, running up and down umpteen stairs — all while keeping to a very tight schedule.

Let me enlighten you about the company and your driver. UPS is so technologically savvy and efficiently run, that companies all over the world are trying to emulate it. This efficiency starts with the truck itself. You have no idea.

The truck is a four-wheel, high-tech warehouse and office made of steel. There isn't a GPS screen with driving directions anywhere on the truck, but there is navigation software that is something out of 007. This "smart" truck monitors and records whether the driver's seatbelt is fastened, the speed at which he's traveling and whether he honked the horn before backing up. Also, it communicates with a command center about whether the driver is on the route to which he's assigned. Is he exactly where he

should be at a certain point in the day given the packages that need to be delivered? You think Big Brother is watching you at work, you ain't seen nothing.

And that clipboard Dave carries? It's not your average Magna Doodle or Etch-a-Sketch. It, too, knows everything. It has so much information on it, and everything on it also is being monitored: what is being delivered, whether the package was damaged or opened before it landed in the truck, whether signatures are required. It even signals when it's time for the driver to take lunch. Really. And when drivers are on lunch break they can't deliver packages even if they want to because the clipboard shuts off. UPS want them to take their lunch.

As for the drivers themselves, they are smart and extremely well trained. They love what they do and the company seems to have very little turnover.

Dave drives from his home in Livermore to the UPS distribution center in San Ramon, where he picks up his truck. The loaders at the center arrange all the packages on the shelves in the order in which they need to be delivered. Each package has a bar code that also is being tracked on the clipboard and throughout computer systems worldwide. Having the truck loaded by delivery order on the route means that the driver is not searching through the truck looking for a package. He knows the next package goes with the next stop.

Now comes the fun part. I get to deliver the packages and ask Dave questions along the way. What did I find out? Plenty. And not just about UPS but also about our community—and even about human nature.

I have never ordered a thing from the Home Shopping Network or QVC but apparently I am in the minority. Every third box we delivered was from there, Zappos or Amazon. Nordstrom didn't do too shabbily, either.

And you may not have included your UPS driver on your wedding invite list, but whom do you think is delivering all those Crate & Barrel boxes?

They know someone in your family is getting married. They know when it's your birthday and where the family and friends who are sending gifts live. They know where you bank and where you're spending your money. It's all in the delivery, folks. And that's just residences. Remember, our route included businesses. I loved that. I felt so officious walking in with the packages and asking recipients to sign the magic clipboard. So cool.

I also learned that I don't necessarily like going to strangers' homes. There are more than a few people in our community who could star in *Hoarding: Buried Alive* on TLC. I was almost hoping that some people wouldn't answer their doors when I knocked. I also found out that your neighborhood UPS driver may be better than Brinks Home Security. Drivers know your neighborhood and are very protective of it and the people who live there. They know who "belongs" on the street and who doesn't. And when it

comes to being on the lookout, they are all over their rearview and side view mirrors. Don't even entertain the idea that you can follow the brown truck and steal packages the driver has just left on customers' porches. One call to 911, and they have it covered. Dave also told me that there have been times when a UPS truck helped the police sandwich in a would-be thief.

Like most UPS drivers, Dave carries dog biscuits. On my street, when Tyler, the neighbors' dog, hears Dave's truck barreling up, he runs out like a kid who hears the ice cream truck. Dave slows down so that Tyler can put his front paws on the second step and get a treat.

The dog treats are part of customer service and serving the neighborhood. One day Dave saw two young boys being chased by a pit bull. The boys were using their bikes as shields to keep the dog from biting them. Dave very carefully pulled up alongside the boys and threw a handful of biscuits at the dog. While it went after the biscuits, he ushered the boys to the other side of his truck.

Dave has seen it all. He's delivered packages to a nudist colony. Along one of his routes he found a body.

Every day is different. He never knows what's ahead. I didn't either. For example, I didn't know there was a cult in Walnut Creek that apparently has a well-established compound. Dave pointed it out to me from the hill high above.

On the truck, off the truck. Up the stairs, down the stairs. On the truck, off the truck. I was exhausted and couldn't wait until the magic clipboard told us we could stop for lunch.

Dave has been with UPS since 1992 and has been a driver since 1997. He works hard but loves his job. He is a happily married father of two and said the people on his route are the nicest people in the world and have become part of his extended family.

"I am here to provide a service and I take that responsibility very seriously," Dave told me. I have to say I felt it, too. When you put on the Brown, you are representing a good company and you are in good company.

So, the next time you see your UPS driver, be sure to say thank you.

They really do deliver.