

As volume expands, ways of receiving parcels evolving for consumers

November 25 2015, by Daniel Moore, Pittsburgh Post-Gazette

Allegheny City Market, tucked inconspicuously into Pittsburgh's Mexican War Streets neighborhood, has built a customer base with its tidy convenience store and deli featuring locally themed sandwiches like the Randyland Reuben, named for artist Randy Gilson's colorful residence a block away.

More recently, the market has been a revolving door for people seeking something else: the growing collection of packages cluttering shelves behind the cash register.

About a month and a half ago, owner Mike Mitchell agreed to enlist his store as an "access point" for United Parcel Service. Per the agreement, the Atlanta-based package delivery giant would drop off 25 packages a week; he would store them and hand them out; and the shipping company would pay him 50 cents a package.

"It's turned into a lot more packages than that, and more than a one-mile radius," Mitchell said.

The "[access point](#)" label may be unique to UPS in Pittsburgh, but such landing places have become widespread as delivery companies face the challenge of moving an ever-increasing slew of goods to customers demanding more options for receiving. Local businesses, rental companies and even college campuses are taking over duties that were traditionally handled by [post office](#) staff.

Online sales have grown in recent years faster than sales at brick-and-mortar locations, meaning consumers are depending more on packages arriving on time and in the locations they request.

"I lived in apartments that didn't have that service, and it is a pain," said Gretchen D'Atri, marketing director for Faros Properties, which manages three residential properties in Pittsburgh. "If you're working all day, who knows when you're going to get to the post office to pick it up or when they'll re-deliver?"

When Faros Properties earlier this year purchased a four-building complex and dubbed it Park View Apartments, the construction of a 784-square-foot storage room behind the front desk was among the major renovations.

At Park View, D'Atri said, delivery workers are instructed to first try calling the resident through the building intercom system located outside the locked ground-floor doors in each building. If no one answers, the workers can drop off the package at the front desk and the concierge attendant will sign on behalf of the resident.

The attendant then prints off a notification and the on-site security team slides the paper under the resident's door. Residents can pick up packages any time. In the uncommon instance a resident doesn't show up, staff will try to deliver it directly to the resident's door.

D'Atri estimated one to two hours of each eight-hour shift on the front desk is dedicated to package responsibilities.

"It takes a good amount of time to sort them, put them on the shelf, to write the resident's name on it," she said. "And then, when people get home from work, they come to the desk to get their packages."

For years, packages were consigned to a small room or alcove in a full-service residential building, said Todd Reidbord, president of Walnut Capital, which owns 2,500 residential units in Pittsburgh.

In some of its older buildings, Walnut Capital has had to expand its storage room.

"That's one of the factors when we're designing a new building: How big is the package room and where do we put it?" Reidbord said.

"People sometimes ask why are people paying all this rent for these new properties, and it's because of these kinds of services. Having a concierge doorman to accept packages and deliver them is a huge factor for some people."

CAMPUS MAIL ROOMS

The University of Pittsburgh's central mail room is a beehive of activity each morning around 10 a.m. when delivery trucks unload student-ordered packages of all sizes - mini-fridges are a popular item.

During the school year, the mail room takes in roughly 15,000 packages per month, with peak months hitting close to 30,000, according to Matthew Sloan, senior manager of mailing and warehouse services. Sloan estimates the pace of arrivals has increased by 50 percent in the past five years.

On a recent morning, about a dozen workers - both student helpers and professional staff - worked to scan package bar codes into an internal tracking system that automatically emails students that a package has arrived: no printing, no paper.

The school rolled out the tracking system during the 2006-07 academic

year to help quicken the turnover of packages, which currently occupy a long stretch of ceiling-high shelving units extending to one edge of the half-moon-shaped room.

Sloan said he's considering expanding the storage room to the other wall, usurping what is now the mail room manager's office.

Carnegie Mellon University has seen a similar tide of packages, Ray Perret, manager of postal services at the school, said in an email.

"Due to greater student reliance on online retailers such as Amazon for the purchase of textbooks, living essentials and even food, annual package volume for Carnegie Mellon students has risen from 107,015 packages received in 2008 to 165,489 in 2014," he said - an increase of about 54 percent.

The school has developed a similar internal tracking system that allows the mail staff to easily sort and distribute items. Students get an email when the staff receives a package.

SMALL BUSINESSES ADAPT

For landing sites without tracking systems, spacious storage areas or the staff to handle them, it can be a less structured operation.

At Allegheny City Market, Mitchell said several regular customers had asked him to reach out to UPS after packages were stolen off their porches during the day.

"In this neighborhood ... someone could walk right by and just snag it," he said, gesturing toward the lack of porches and the small stoops.

In other cases, UPS approached local businesses.

Ray Trammell, owner of Brighton Market n More, a clothing and convenience store, said UPS just this month asked if he could store some packages in his back room. He lasted about a week, he said, before the work of managing the packages wasn't worth the 50-cents-a-package financial benefit.

"All the people who came to get the packages were pretty happy about it, but I gotta run a business," he said. "I had to check the package in, keep my eye on the package, help people carry the package to their car. It just wasn't worth it."

Mitchell is sticking it out, at least until he receives payment for his first month as a de facto post office.

Though he said it's nice to do a service for his neighbors, it hasn't given a boost to his business so far as promised.

"Half the time, people want their package and want to leave as quickly as possible," he said.

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Citation: As volume expands, ways of receiving parcels evolving for consumers (2015, November 25) retrieved 25 April 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2015-11-volume-ways-parcels-evolving-consumers.html>

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