

Era of Delivery

In this age of climate awareness, when we are collectively starting to understand the human impact on our planet, how can we find ourselves adding to the already grim problems we face? One faction is our material economy. Just in and of itself, it's a huge contributor to global warming, depletion of resources, and the toxification of our environment. It shows to be a linear course of finite resources that cannot continue. The fact that we are now piling onto this phenomenon with delivery and all the promises that go along with it, is like putting kerosene on a wildfire. What is it about convenience that suddenly makes us put blinders on?

Several years ago, I started noticing people all over the grocery store wearing the same T-shirt. One day I went up to one of these people and asked if they played in a softball league. They were delivery shoppers. Ha! Fast forward to 2019, and about 1/3 of the store is filled with these shirts and the field is growing and the promises more insane. Groceries delivered in under an hour! I realize I am clearly in the minority, but I like shopping for groceries, and I have a hard time doing my own shopping in under an hour. The last time I was at the store, every other aisle I went down had this huge rolling shelf with a bored looking person staring at their phone and throwing items in each section. It turned out to be curbside shopping! The cart took up space - no one could get around them, gridlock ensued, and the pickers were oblivious. Now, rather than connecting with fellow foodies, my shopping experience is with crazed people scrambling through the cereal aisle and general frustration.

While I'm sad that shopping for groceries has lost its appeal for people, I understand that something must give in our crazy schedules. I can lament for days gone by where deciding what was on the menu was based on availability and freshness. When cuisine celebrated the

seasons. There is nothing better than grilled corn on the cob at the end of summer and butternut squash in the winter. Freshly harvested produce really does taste better. Most of all, it's that chance to experience or taste something new that gets missed if you rely on only a list, and especially if the shopper isn't you. One time I came home with everything to make paella because it was Spanish week. It wasn't what I planned for, but it was so much fun. I feel like participating in this important task of self and family sustenance can play a large role in our life experience, but we do have to make priorities. As long as we are eating healthy, if it means letting go of catching peaches at their ripest to spend time with your children, then so be it. This new craze of ordering your groceries online isn't the real issue, but I do think it captures the essence of our general outlook on shopping.

I was a commercial interior designer, specializing in office environments. When we started a project, the first thing we did is assess space needs. When everything went "digital" there was a brief time that the mail room for a big company almost became obsolete. Then it switched, and overnight mail activity skyrocketed. It turned out to not be for the company, but for all the employees receiving the bounty of their online retail shopping. Companies could not provide enough space or manpower to keep up, and they responded with mandates for no personal deliveries or returns.

I also fell into this trap. I could order the formula or changing table pad I needed for my baby, and I didn't have to load her up in the car to go get them. The next thing you know I have a special membership and things are coming to me every other day for "free".

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Then I started paying attention. Even though I would group my orders, they all came at different times. For each delivery, I had a truck stopped in front of my house for about 2 minutes. Often, the item I purchased was swimming around in this giant box with plastic bubbles all by itself. Mind you, the packaging had recycling symbols, but whether it can be recycled is dependent on many factors, and when it comes to plastic the statistics are grim. We started stockpiling cardboard, which was good for wrapping presents and all, but it started to become too much. While I began to rethink this habit we got into, the rest of the world was plowing onward with more compelling features like delivery in under an hour. And people buy more and more.

What has happened? Where is this going? Why isn't anyone talking about this?

The residuals of this behavior are multi-faceted.

First, it's taking a toll on the environment. Our fossil fuel consumption was already ridiculously out of touch. Now, we are exponentially adding to it by these single item deliveries, all day, every day. Say you buy a hairbrush. Think about the path that that one hairbrush takes to get into your hands. Chances are, it's probably coming from China. Skipping over the raw materials prior to becoming a hairbrush, once in its final form, at the least it's transported from factory to ship, ship to dock, dock to distribution, distribution to store, and store to you. Much of this path is the same as if you purchased this item from the store. However, it's this last step that is truly baffling to me. If you go to the store to buy that hairbrush, likely you are purchasing several other things as well. With that one trip, you are bringing home more than that one hairbrush. If you had all those items ordered and delivered, each one would be its own trip. And it would come in a truck powered by fossil fuel with low gas mileage and

no real way to know how far it traveled before it ended up at your doorstep.

Then there is the effect it's having on motor traffic. In New York City, in "No Easy Answers as NYC Searches for Better Ways to Get Freight into a Crowded City" published by CITYLIMITS.ORG, surveys show that approximately 45% of residents receive goods at least once a week. With a population of around 8.5 million, you could see how that could really start having an impact. Everywhere you look is a box truck delivering a package. With limited parking they stop in the street, put their hazard lights on, and expect everyone to go around them for that 2-3 minutes they are running that box to the door or mail room. Now imagine that on every block, every moment of the day. And back to the climate. Now all the cars are sitting idle along with the delivery truck, spewing out pollution and carbon emissions.

What about the cost of shipping? Apparently, corporations are offered bulk deals that make freight unbelievably affordable. If you are a big manufacturer you could ship a plastic egg halfway across the world for almost nothing. I see how this would benefit the shipping industry by ensuring traffic and retail by keeping affordability in check. But on the other hand, it completely skews the real costs, drives up our carbon usage, and in the end stifles the incentive for real sustainable solutions. Just looking at the ocean freight industry, according to ["The environmental cost of shipping stuff is huge. Can we fix it?"](#) traffic has increased by 2/3 since 2003, and its emissions account for 4% of human based carbon emission, with predictions of 14% by 2050. If the cost of shipping a plastic egg halfway across the world were truly representative, you'd see a plastic egg that would cost a whole lot more. It might even exceed the value we may have on that plastic egg. With this problem realized, maybe real solutions could be explored. What if the

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shipping industry put more emphasis on sustainable or regenerative fuels? Maybe that egg is manufactured closer to the destination? Or what if we used something besides a plastic egg?

Going back to the path of that hairbrush, let's think about the packaging. Along its course, it probably gets packed and unpacked many times. Going from the manufacturer to the distributor it is likely grouped with like products, that share a package. At the distributor, it probably gets unpacked, regrouped, and repackaged. Once in the store its packaging may wind down - maybe a bag for the shopper to carry the item and other purchases home, unless of course you brought your own. But, for the online sales, the items often get individually packaged. If you've ever gotten an order from a clothing store, you'll see a plastic wrapper around each thing. Then each individual item gets wrapped or boxed again for shipping. There are some great possibilities in plastics using biomaterial, but in its current state, plastics have a huge impact on our environment. And while paper products can be recycled, there is a limit to how many times it can happen, and then we are back to tapping into natural resources again. We need to reevaluate our use of packaging, and an obvious place to start is retail. Do we really need all this packaging? Are there ways to pare back? Are there different ways to group things? Are there different chemistries that could support our need for packaging? What could we do if we really, really had to? I could go deeper here and talk about all the crazy little tags and plastic strings too, but I'll save that for another time.

Now that I have become aware of this phenomenon, I try hard to find solutions in brick and mortar stores. Many times, I cannot find what I'm looking for and must resort to buying it online. I think back on a decade ago and I don't remember having this trouble. Is it because we expect too many options or is it because there

are less products in stores? I worry that it's the latter. And worse, I worry that stores may go away completely. There are times when I want to physically see my potential purchase. I want to pick it up and turn it around and push the switch. I want to know that it has value before I invest my money and time. I would hate to lose that opportunity.

Shopping is sort of like the hunting and gathering of our time. It's an experience. It's a journey. We plan our destination, and along the way we are exposed to the world. Sometimes it requires adjusting as we go. Think about buying shoes. What if the shoes that look amazing feel horrible once you put them on, which is a painful reality for me. If you are at the store, you can try another pair and potentially walk out with just what you needed. Sure, there are people who feel like they've conquered these online issues by ordering 6 pairs and returning what doesn't work, but you might miss a better solution. You miss all the other experiences, not to mention adding back the extra trips and packaging those shoes take on by sending them back.

We connect with people too. You walk by people in the parking lot or sit next to them if you ride the bus. You interact with other shoppers by following the unspoken etiquette of aisle flow or the art of the perfect perusing space. Sometimes someone asks you where something is. Sometimes you learn about something even better. Sometimes you chit chat with a clerk about grilling potatoes. Nothing takes the place of real conversations with real people, and with everyone hiding behind devices and social media, it's important to keep this vital form of connection open for humanity.

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Just getting out of the house is something! It may be a lost skill to show ourselves as presentable. It won't be long before we all look the same in tight stretchy black things and sneakers. Don't get me wrong - I like comfort. But what will happen to all our other clothes? Those funky plaid pants or groovy green coat. I still hold out for that individual expression; I believe it adds to the unique tapestry of our world.

The western world already has a problem with over consumption. With it being so easy to buy anything and everything, we may skip over the old filters we used for making a purchase - do we really need it? Will we really use it? Is there value? Will it last? Is there something else that would work? And with virtual money, the idea of working to a budget is even further removed. Well, yes you could return it and get your money back, but how many times does that happen and what is the real cost. Chances are that item that didn't "work" or that we got tired of gets ushered to the landfill, and a new item takes its place. According to [The Story of Stuff](#), 99% of what we buy after 6 months has already made its way into some form of refuge.

If you put this all together, it seems we use enormous amounts of resources and energy, often times finite, to create trash.

I get it. Why would you want to spend two hours wandering around a store, when you could tap some buttons and have it your door? I have been guilty. But I fear there will be repercussions of consumerism and this big swing in online shopping is only making it worse. Retail has become a huge part of our economy, and our culture. I'm not suggesting that online shopping goes away or that people should live with less (or maybe I am?), but I do think we need to honestly address what is happening, especially when it comes to delivery. As an optimist, could it mean a new way of purchasing comes about? Is there another way to provide goods? If delivery is here to stay, is there a way to make the journey of that good regenerative instead of depletive? I know creativity abounds when we're faced with challenges. If we faced reality, I know we could meet these challenges with bold new ideas. Who knows, maybe a whole new industry emerges, one we never thought of before? And what about time? I think our whole society has been on a quest for shifting time from necessity to leisure, which is why most people are apt to use online shopping. What if we used that gained time for something positive? What if it really made us happy?