



Don't let me down!

Customers need to know how long delivery takes and how much it costs. Why, especially at this time of year, do none of the 40 e-commerce sites we analysed promote this simple information on their home pages?

If I order something from your web site and delivery gets screwed up, I'm annoyed. But if I've bought a gift for my nearest and dearest and you don't deliver, I'm incandescent. You've embarrassed me in public, you've made me appear as if I don't care, you've hurt someone I love. I hate you! I want to punish you! Everyone who'll listen will be told of your dishonesty, duplicity and incompetence.

I've talked to customers who are normally calm, rational and reserved, and they admit to weeping down the phone to customer services in a mixture of fury and frustration when a gift fails to turn up as promised.

But Christmas is the time of year for tantrums and tears and everyone who's worked in your call centre for more than 11 months will know what's coming when cherished gifts go astray.

Delivery in the mind of the customer

In the mind of the customer there are two sides to delivery: what is promised and how that promise is kept. This, of course presents a delicate balancing act for the e-commerce manager – promise a little and you'll keep your promise but may lose the sale; promise too much and you'll get the sale but lose the repeat business and the customer's word-of-mouth endorsement to their friends. How that balance is struck depends on the type of product you offer, the needs of your customers and the actions of your competitors – but unless you have a business strategy of living fast and dying young, the old maxim of under-promise and over-deliver is probably best.

In this article I want to focus on the delivery promise you make to your customers. This is partly to redress an imbalance. It's almost certain that operational aspects of delivery (stock / warehouse management, delivery contracts etc) are uppermost in most e-commerce managers' minds right now. My point is that you mustn't forget to communicate the fruits of all that hard work to your customers as they browse your web site. From the data we've found whilst researching this article (see below) there is lots of scope for improvement, nothing too complicated to change and significant competitive advantage to be gained.

There are only certain questions customers want to ask about delivery and most of them have simple answers.

1. What's the delivery price?
2. What are the delivery date and time?
3. What are the delivery options?
 - a. Is next day / express available?
 - b. Are timed/evening/weekend delivery available?
 - c. Is gift wrap / gift message service available?
4. What are the delivery conditions?
 - a. Are there delivery exclusions (where you don't deliver to)?
 - b. Is a signature required?
 - c. Is there facility for special delivery instructions?
 - d. Is online delivery tracking available?
 - e. What are the returns process and cost?

Of course there will be lots of combinations and permutations of these (e.g. different prices, dates, options and conditions for International delivery) but most customers, most of the time only want a few simple answers.

Delivery information on the home page


We looked at the home pages of 40 sites, ranging from high street brands to smaller direct mail companies. Only 11 contained any form of delivery messaging (this was following the end of the postal strike, so these didn't include any temporary reassurances or warnings about delivery disruptions). Of these, two were simply mentions of 'delivered overnight' and 'speedy delivery' embedded in other marketing messages and one was a niche promotion ('we deliver worldwide ...'). Of the remaining 8, there were 3 order-value-boosters – buy more and get free delivery. These can be powerful ways of increasing revenues but, as seen in the examples below, great care is needed in their execution.

Dukeshill sells ham, bacon, cured meats and puddings. Anyone buying this sort of food online will have two important delivery issues on their mind – firstly, how is it delivered, to ensure that it arrives as fresh and appetising as it appears in the pictures? Secondly, how can I make absolutely certain that it arrives in time (although not too early!) for my dinner party on Saturday? But Dukeshill doesn't answer either of these questions up front on the home page – instead they give me a promotional message trying to persuade me to spend more money (free delivery on orders over £100). So far, however, they haven't persuaded me to spend any money – I have two significant concerns about their basic proposition that they have failed to address before they have tried to up-sell me. So, by all means include a delivery promotion on the home page but make sure it adds to basic delivery information and doesn't replace it. Good first impressions matter and they don't come from messaging that appears more focused on what you want to tell me than what I want to hear.



Dukeshill featured this delivery promotion on the home page without explaining what the basic delivery proposition is!
<http://www.dukeshillham.co.uk/>

The Baker Ross promotion falls victim to a very common but very dangerous trap in web design: no matter how much care and attention you take in your copywriting and layout, those inconsiderate customers of yours just don't take the time to read what you've written! The average time people spend looking at web pages continues to drop year on year – e-commerce page-views dropped below 30 seconds per page a few years ago. Customers only take time to scan, not read; and they will only scan for as long as it takes them to work out what is being offered and whether it is of interest to them. Quickly scanning the Baker Ross delivery promotions reveals that they offer free delivery, at a saving of £3.45. I suspect only a small minority of customers will notice the small print making it clear that they need to spend £75 before they qualify. Until, that is, they get to the checkout, certain that delivery is free, only to have their expectations dashed just before they were about to pay.



Baker Ross's promotion is too easy to misread as offering free delivery on everything.
<http://www.bakerross.co.uk/>

From our sample of 40 sites, only 5 had prominent delivery messaging on the home page. I Want One Of Those has a striking 'Fast delivery' image backed up with the tag line 'really very very quick'. No mention is made of how quick or how expensive – hardly an 'under-promise', especially when the

delivery offer isn't particularly exceptional ('1-3 day' for £3.95, 'next day' for £5.95 and 'before noon next day' for £7.95). Play.com has 'free delivery on everything' as a core part of its sales proposition and this is prominent on the header of every page. Argos, Harrods and Muddy Puddles are the only sites with delivery price promoted on the home page – Muddy Puddles add the nice differentiator that returns are free. Curiously, not a single site in our review featured both the key pieces of information that every customer wants to know about delivery – how long does it take and how much does it cost.

		
http://www.muddypuddles.com/	www.argos.co.uk	http://www.iwantoneofthose.com/
<p>FREE DELIVERY ON EVERYTHING</p>		<p>Standard UK Delivery £4.95* *Click here for more details</p>
www.play.com		www.harrods.com

Delivery – the fine print

If, as is inevitable now and again, you fail to deliver as promised, here's a tip on how to make absolutely certain your disappointed customer never buys from you again: get your call centre to tell them that its actually all their fault because they hadn't read the small print tucked away in your long and impenetrable terms and conditions – "You did tick the box, Sir to confirm that you had read and agreed to them during the checkout process".

To a certain extent, fine print will always be fine print. That, however, is no excuse for abandoning any attempt at best practice. Serenata Flowers is the most innovative e-commerce company I know and has grown a highly successful business on the back of slick technology and elegant design, with fabulous products to boot. When it comes to the fine print on delivery, however, they are the living proof that even the best in the business gets it wrong every now and then. Serenata have a page with 700 closely spaced words on their delivery arrangements. Assuming this might be sufficient fine print, few customers, I'm sure, would choose to look for more. That would be a mistake! In amongst the other 26 links in the footer of every page is one called 'terms and conditions' and this contains twice as much fine print on delivery as the delivery-fine-print page itself. No mention is made on the delivery page of these additional terms and conditions, neither are there any links referring customers to specific delivery terms and conditions. What makes this doubly unfortunate, and potentially damaging to the Serenata brand, is that some of these hard-to-find delivery terms and conditions place significant conditions and exceptions to the 'no-quibble' guarantee promoted prominently on every page.



www.serenataflowers.com have plenty of delivery fine-print (highlighted) 'hidden' in their terms and conditions and not cross-referenced from their delivery information

4 steps to getting the delivery promise right

Here's how I suggest you go about getting it right

1. Start with the detail. Write all your fine-print on delivery as systematically and concisely as possible. This will take a few iterations but generally it will become shorter and clearer the more you work at it.
2. Add meaningful headers to divide the text into sections and then highlight the key offers, conditions and exceptions within the text. This will make it easy for the customer to scan for the headings relevant to their order.
3. Insert a summary of the key elements of your delivery proposition at the top of the page and link these to the more detailed explanations below.
4. Identify the two or three features of your delivery offer that customers will most want to know and promote them on all your landing pages. As mentioned above, this will usually be how long does delivery take and what does it cost, but this may not always be the case. In the second week of December, for example it might be the ordering deadline for Christmas delivery, for both standard and express service.

With all of these in place, both you and your customers should be heading for a happy, and prosperous New Year!

Dr Mike Baxter is Director of Customer Experience for Moneyspyder