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THE CULT OF THE UPS DRIVER

In every community of America and in more than two hundred countries abroad, brown-garbed drivers in brown vehicles delivering brown packages are a welcome feature of everyday life. They represent the public face of a company that has changed the world, delivery by delivery, for a hundred years.

UPS drivers are strong. They're dependable. They're polite. They're determined. And they nearly always bear an object of desire! No wonder UPS drivers capture our imagination. They meet expectations more than 10,000 times a minute, every day, worldwide. Talk about delivering the goods!

In a world of dashed hopes and diminishing returns, these dutiful UPS drivers are refreshing anomalies. Some would say they are anachronisms. Diligence, dedication, job commitment, and politeness? Hardly the stuff we experience in most service industries today. Yet these old-fashioned values support UPS's impressive century-old success and by no small measure inspire the UPS drivers' cult status.

The Mystique

The drivers, a majority of whom are male, all aged at least twenty-one, are charming but elusive. An irresistible combination. The UPS driver mystique takes effect swiftly. There's the eye contact. The good manners. Maybe the driver gives your pet a treat. Maybe he even endears himself to your children. Then *whoosh*. After the fleeting exchange, you stand there, holding the package,

remembering the sincerity and consideration . . . and efficient vigor. Therein lies the UPS mystique.

Moving at a clip can be a UPS driver's best protection. This I know from personal experience. Back when I was a young driver in Hollywood, running off packages all day, I was in the best shape I'd ever been in but was so busy I hardly noticed when people paid attention to me. However, it didn't take me long to figure out that a good-looking administrator in the Capital Records building had a crush on me. When I came in, her coworkers always called her up front to accept, even though it wasn't her job to sign for packages. They were trying to maximize her contact with me. I was flattered, but didn't have time for more than a polite and brief exchange. Plus I was already married. A couple of years later, I ran into her at a UPS company picnic. We chatted and she introduced me to her new husband—another UPS driver! Apparently she caught one for herself.

A crush on a UPS delivery driver certainly isn't hopeless. Several of my fellow drivers met women on their routes whom they eventually married, and many young UPS drivers will tell you of meeting members of the opposite sex during the working day. The *Wall Street Journal* recently ran a story featuring a female runner who ordered new sneakers every week, delivered by UPS, just so she'd be afforded more contact with her brown-collared love target—contact which ultimately resulted in marriage. Another article, this one in the *Seattle Post Intelligencer,* reported that a UPS driver, on his rounds, asked an attractive woman, "Is there anything to pick up today?"

"No."

"Then, how about you?" he rejoined in a greeting that led to marriage.

Infatuation can be a two-way street. My route in the Hollywood Hills years ago had its fair share of attractions. As an example, movie star Ava Gardner's sister lived there, but she rarely received UPS deliveries herself. When her address did get packages, all from numerous top retail stores, I knew that her glamorous sister was vis-

iting. Ava lived in Spain at the time but loved to shop when she came to town. Even in harsh daylight, sans makeup, she was incredibly pretty, with the most seductive eyes. I was smitten with this world-class beauty but she maintained a polite aloofness.

Also in the Hollywood Hills, Jan Sterling, a beautiful and popular actress of the time, came to the door in a slinky dress. Taking the package, she said, "Oh I'm glad you're here." Then she swiveled on her heels and motioned to the zipper of her gown. I did the gentlemanly thing, zipped her up with shaky hands, and continued on my way. UPSers are trained, after all, to provide service.

Mystique aside, UPS drivers have an enterprise behind them that is a lot more compelling than any love fantasy, though to be sure some of them are quite inventive, such as the Internet blog entry featuring an improvised berth of cushion crating and bubble-wrap. I've come to feel that the cult of the UPS driver is actually infatuation with something much bigger than individual drivers or even all the drivers together. It is a cult of UPS's unrelenting commitment to success.

The Rigor

The demands of the job leave no time for socializing. Other truckers and deliverymen may accept a cup of coffee or engage in chit-chat. But an urban UPS driver must make approximately two hundred delivery stops in a scheduled day—and make them in a brisk, fast-paced fashion, because beginning the same time daily, thirty or so pickup stops are waiting. The pressure is on to finish, deliver, and unload everything so the package car (never called a truck by UPS) is empty to receive new pickups. This means that even the most appealing customers are outcompeted by commitments, quotas, punctuality, and performance measurements.

Drivers have a lot of autonomy, but at their back is a Byzantine system that evolved over a hundred years along lines conceived by the extremely disciplined and fastidious company founder, Jim Casey. A wiry little man, Casey began at the bottom. He speedily

delivered messages and packages in turn-of-the-century Seattle *on foot*. Casey learned about efficiency by doing. Today, optimizing this connection between body and task is the responsibility of UPS's cadre of efficiency experts, most of whom were also drivers. They are just as tireless and never stop honing delivery into a fine art.

From the company's very beginning, UPS has continually improved and refined its methods. Ergonomics professionals analyze and optimize every juncture between work and human being. Anatomy, physiology, and psychology come together to make the task fit the human and the human fit the task, harming neither the human nor the delivery. Add to that beneficial working postures, maximizing power while minimizing excessive force, nutrition, and diminishing vibration and other adverse exposures. Talk about fitness training!

Every motion at UPS is timed, measured, and refined to its ergonomic best, always balancing physical work rate with workload. Engineers, industrial designers, computer specialists, physicians, health and safety practitioners, and trainers strive to decrease stress, errors, and other debilitations. All movements at UPS are subject to efficiency modifications and institutionalized. As the old maxim among what are now many hundreds of UPS industrial engineers goes, "In God we trust; everything else we measure." As a result, UPSers turn out *better* than machines.

Driver training is designed to establish a cognitive match between the trainee and the tasks. Drivers are instructed to park as close to the point of delivery as possible. To minimize accidents, especially backing accidents, the simple rule "Don't Back" is part of their training. Leaving the vehicle, they are expected to grab the keys with their right hand, use the hand rail with their left hand, and then walk at a brisk pace. Upon return they are instructed to hold their keys on their right pinky finger, grab the hand rail with the right hand, enter their package car, buckle their seat with the left hand and insert the ignition key with their right . . . at each stop. It's that precise. The seconds saved become minutes over the day. Since every minute counts when a driver is trying to finish on

time, and a few minutes each day mean big dollars, these methods have lasted.

Not just economy of motion and efficiency are quantified. The drivers are measured on safety too. They are gauged by numerous indices—from individual (years of safe driving without a preventable vehicle accident) to group (1,000 collective days of accident-free driving) to district and company-wide (accidents per 100,000 driver hours, and so on). To help reduce accidents, safety committees exist at all levels.

Activities are not just improved and monitored but celebrated. A man who years later became my dispatcher, driver Ray McCue, received the company's first gold watch for five years of safe driving. That was back in 1928. Today, individual safe drivers are still honored annually, and in 2006 there were more than 4,000 active drivers who had driven for twenty-five years or more without an avoidable accident. And eighty-seven of them had over thirty-five years, topped by a Kentucky district feeder driver, Ron Sowder, who had forty-three years without an accident! Today's UPS drivers log more than two billion miles per year and average less than one accident for every million miles driven.

To outsiders the UPS regime has always seemed excessive. In 1947, writer Philip Hamburger described a company so strict that UPS regulations "could easily be mistaken for the house rules of a Tibetan monastery." This rigor, in effect, disciplines the men and women to resist temptation. It also reflects the kind of management that supports those 92,000 UPS drivers.

The Brawn

UPS maintains a commendable female hiring quota. More on this in Chapter Eight. Still, more men apply for driver positions and the majority of the drivers are men.

Why so many men? The extreme physical demands of the job—moving hundreds of packages daily, weighing up to 150 pounds each—tend to attract men. And not just any men. Drivers don't

just happen. Usually, UPS novices sweat and heave their way into driver positions via other strenuous entry-level package-handling jobs, such as unloading, preloading, and sorting, most often starting out part time. The long waiting list for driving—up to four or five years—and the exertion these hopefuls do in the meantime separate the wanna-bes from the chosen.

Package handling in the hubs is hard and punishing. It is not for everyone. Recruiters even show videos of package handling to prospects to prepare them. Some handlers quit early on, some even on the first day after experiencing how difficult it really is. Yet, with practice and supervision, they learn how to maneuver more and more weight, which helps prepare them to become drivers.

For those who stick it out, this interlude is a kind of boot camp, indoctrinating employees with UPS's unique corporate culture and expectations, all the while luring them with the considerable bunch of UPS carrots: excellent pay, great health insurance, education leave, tuition assistance, generous vacation allotments, and (since the company went public) the employee stock purchase plan. Regular follow-up with supervisors and the fine example of senior employees combine to inspire (or for some—repel) devotion. By the time employees have moved a few mountains of cardboard-clad merchandise, they have either caught the UPS commitment or they haven't. If they have, that seed of UPS perseverance will spread through their systems until they too "bleed brown blood."

Finally, prospective drivers get to the head of the waiting list. There, they undergo an additional grueling training program that is so effective that government agencies and other companies use it as a model. The indoctrination includes twenty hours of computer-based classroom training and on-road supervisor training, which incorporates "Space and Visibility" training from day one. Following that, they have thirty working days to prove themselves, as a supervisor carefully scrutinizes their performance in three safety-evaluation rides. If they can't meet the demands, they must return to the other job and wait as long as six months before reapplying. This process can be more competitive than law school!

The Goods

People have always bought more than they could carry, and a hundred years ago they had no cars to help them out. Hence, when Jim Casey and his partners began their delivery service, it served only department stores, and the UPS role was to complete the stores' retail transactions.

Today department stores compete with eBay and other online commerce. Many shopping excursions take place in the Internet ether and are de-peopled. More and more, UPS drivers are shoppers' *only* human contact. The drivers' relationship with the packages is again, as it was in the early twentieth century, the closing event in the retail experience.

Back in the 1950s a long-time UPS employee in Los Angeles named Homer Hunt won a slogan contest with his entry "Every Parcel a Guest of Honor." Hokey though this phrase may be, it has endured because it describes the accommodations and services each driver provides during his time with the parcel. UPSers took it to heart.

Every parcel is different and in some way unique. Drivers get to know a package by shape, size, and even odor—as when the distinctive smell from cosmetics permeates a carton—and to associate it with a certain customer. Pulling up to an upholstery shop, a driver might instinctively grab the wrapped roll of fabric, maybe not even checking the label until walking to the shop. Merchandise delivered reflects the route itself. In Hollywood, as an example, I regularly picked up or delivered all kinds of things related to the movie business, including the Academy Awards Oscar statuettes themselves. Drivers can learn a lot about their consignees based on their incoming merchandise. For example, if a company starts receiving more C.O.D. packages than before, it's often a good sign that its owner is having financial difficulties.

The 3.75 *billion* packages UPS delivered worldwide in 2005 represented a substantial section of the world's economy and included a little of everything, from contents obviously critical to those seemingly mundane. The packages have contained time-sensitive

serums and other medicines, live animals, firearms, college students' clothing, and junior's baseball cards; the list is endless. With such a large market resting on their efficiency, UPS drivers work to stay comfortable with their cargo. It's a big part of their job.

The Uniform

"There's something about a man in uniform," people say. What is that something? Reliability. Strength. Respect. Safety. These are qualities most people associate with heroes.

When UPS first issued complete uniforms back in the early 1920s most people in uniform were in the military, law enforcement, and medical professions, and uniforms sent a message of assurance. The 1923 UPS driver uniform consisted of shirt and tie, long jacket and cap. The brown color of UPS apparel, first featured in 1925, and of the package cars, was an intentional understatement, designed in deference to UPS's more flashy customers and as a way to project humility, one of Jim Casey's most strongly held values. Sure, brown didn't show dirt, but Casey was also very strict about grooming. UPS washes and mends the uniforms as needed. The bland color was about maintaining a sense of respectful humility.

During World War II, the Korean War, and up into the 1960s, uniformed men traded in authority and popularity, and UPS trousers were still long. When I was a driver, we had to wear thick long pants all year long, even when the temperature inside those package cars would soar over 120 degrees.

In those days the uniform included a captain's hat, with a shiny dark bill and the UPS badge on the peak. It was the kind of headgear worn by fire and police officers and Air Force pilots, rather weighty and uncomfortable after a while. We were obliged to wear them all day, too, or risk getting a pink demerit slip.

Then suddenly the counterculture happened. Young people, protesting against the Vietnam War, segregation, and government authority, looked at uniformed personnel not with respect but with

suspicion, adopting a generational style that emphasized individualism and informality. While they had no direct influence on corporate decision making, emerging cultural trends that valued comfort over formality began to find their way into corporate America.

UPS driver bow ties went by the wayside in the early 1950s, yet still had to be worn in several Midwest and East Coast locations through the next decade. By the time I became a manager in 1966, no one on the West Coast wore a bow tie; nonetheless, whenever I photographed a driver for national use I had to show him in a bow tie, so I carried a black clip-on tie in my camera case. The UPS headgear was the final point of contention. The hat eventually became optional in 1972—which all but ensured its demise.

Then, by the 1980s, focus group discussions, group meetings, one-on-one "Talk, Listen and Act" sessions, exit interviews, and other ongoing UPS communications revealed that *drivers would like to wear shorts!* It was time for UPS to rethink the haberdashery.

After years of resisting change, the company yielded to the drivers and the famous UPS shorts came into being. In its usual methodical manner, the company selected a few test locations—Sacramento, Tucson, and Hawaii—and supplied some of the drivers with shorts. As a member of management, I interviewed the drivers of one Tucson center who were wearing the "experimental shorts" and learned that they not only loved them, they were fending off questions from the other Tucson drivers, who kept asking when the change would include everyone. Our reports confirmed what was suspected and was already set in motion: *the drivers would wear shorts*. By then, however, I was stuck in a suit and tie every day.

The new uniform recast the UPS driver from a tired, traditional service worker image to one a bit spiffier and more up-beat. Shorts. Polyester. Built-in collar stays. Reinforced stitching, pocket-within-a-pocket for a pen, glued-on gold crest, long shirttails that would stay tucked in. Drivers, whose whole day is an aerobic workout, sometimes roll up their sleeves and wear shorts whether by sleet or by snow or by hail . . . and gratefully.

Many customers have commented that the shorts and the legs that fill them have made driver ogling that much more gratifying. Competition between UPS and FedEx extends to their uniforms. Many drivers and the public too find FedEx's fashion sense a bit flashier than Big Brown's. Still, it's all in what you're after. So what if FedEx drivers have ten mix-n-match options? UPS drivers deliver one-third again as many packages every day, and they generally make more money and enjoy better benefits.

Even though the UPS uniform is, by any measure, staid, UPS cultivates good relations with fashion designers in any way it can. UPS cosponsors the annual New York Fashion Week, selecting ten designers to incorporate *UPS brown* into their collections. Among the inspirations in 2006, svelte models sported thigh-high boots and safari-inspired hot-pant jumpsuits for the gals, and macho work boots and sleeveless shirts for the guys.

Unlike Army-Navy surplus, UPS uniforms are a tightly controlled commodity. The uniform belongs to UPS. Shirts, shorts, even logo-embroidered socks are allocated—five outfits, one for every workday. UPS washes and presses the shirts and shorts, and reclaims the uniforms for replacement when they wear out.

Management guards these items closely because the brown UPS wardrobe has become synonymous with service. They don't risk a uniform's misuse. Selling used uniforms on eBay is against company policy. Worn-out uniforms must be destroyed. Even the American flag, subject of legislation, doesn't have this kind of protection, maybe because the American flag isn't a pass-card to every business and household.

When UPS uniforms are missing, or presumed missing, UPS goes after them like a pack of hounds. A blogger named Darren Barefoot found a shirt at a thrift store and featured it on his Web site. UPS attorneys contacted him immediately and he handed over the shirt. Sometimes errant UPS uniforms set off a national alert. In 2003 a false claim was made that UPS uniforms, valued at $32,000, were missing. What would happen if people posing as trusted UPS

drivers gained access to you and your household or business for shady reasons? Sure. Terrorists might want to pose as UPS drivers. After a period of media mayhem, UPS spokespeople debunked the claim. UPS does not condone the sale of its uniforms and continues to investigate any reports of their unauthorized use.

In some instances UPS has allowed law enforcement agencies the use of uniforms, usually with a UPS loss-prevention manager nearby. Say, for example, that acting on a tip or information from another source, the agency has learned that a package contains illegal drugs. Drug enforcement officials in UPS uniform make the delivery and nab the suspect attempting to sign for them. This scenario, and others like it, has happened throughout the country on numerous occasions.

The Service

Jim Casey made sure that service was the fulcrum on which all business decisions swing. If longevity and economics are any measure, the company founder's decision was dead on. "Our real, primary objective is to serve—to render perfect service to our stores and their customers. If we keep that objective constantly in mind, our reward in money can be beyond our fondest dreams," Casey said.

How did the company achieve high service levels in all areas of its operation? The company has high standards and is continually making higher ones. Unrelenting problem solving, innovative technology, new services, and choreographed delivery procedures: all grease the wheels of UPS operation.

Even one package not delivered? That's a service failure. Drivers often find themselves going out of the way to provide utmost service, even if it means incurring extra costs to get one package delivered on time. Management meets regularly with employees to discuss service, to work as a team to solve problems, even with the involvement of hourly employees. Employee groups constantly dissect any service failure at regular *Service Involvement Meetings*.

The meetings are also a forum for recognizing exceptional service stories.

As a result of all this teamwork, monastic-style though it may be, the sum of UPS is greater than the parts. Cult or no cult, no one individual dominates. UPS drivers work as superheroes work, tirelessly and seamlessly. They not only hear but understand and emulate the company mantra intoned by Jim Casey, "Service—the sum of many little things done well." Which raises the question: Who was this guy Casey?