

# COULD YOU BE A COURIER?

An on-line courier exchange system promises to benefit both big and small firms. Will Shiers reports.



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Asked to sum up Courier Exchange (CX) in one sound bite, company owner

Lyall Cresswell says: "it's a one-stop-shopping centre for the courier industry".

This is a good description for the virtual network he created just over two years ago.

By logging on to [www.courierexchange.co.uk](http://www.courierexchange.co.uk) courier companies, both large and small are able to share work and information, developing trading relationships in the meantime. In other words, it's a way of bringing together what has traditionally always been a fragmented industry.

If Courier Exchange is a shopping centre, then Cresswell is the landlord. It is his job to vet the quality of the tenants, make sure the mix is right, publicise it to

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make sure people come in and provide the necessary security.

Cresswell is not new to the industry, he previously ran his own specialist freight business. It was while he was doing this that the idea of the CX website came to him. A little over two years down the line, and CX is the largest company of its type in the UK.

Cresswell explains that his core market was originally companies with small fleets of bikes, vans and 7.5 tonners, but this trend is beginning to change. Today's 500 plus subscribers run anything from two to 200 vehicles and he's currently in talks with a potential customer with 1,000 vehicles and 40 depots. "An increasing number of haulage companies are joining too," he adds.

Although primarily a dot-com company, some of CX's less computer-friendly members prefer to telephone the Nottingham call centre instead. It currently employs 12 members of staff, both for the UK and German operations.

The key idea behind the CX concept is the return journey. Couriers with space on a van, truck or bike are able to put a post on the site in the hope of getting a profit-boosting backhaul load. Likewise, those with jobs that they do not wish to satisfy can post the work in the Goods to Move section. These are instantly matched to the best available operator via the CX database, and sent out instantly to subscribers by either e-mail or SMS.

The company has also developed a number of new ideas, including a specialised

tender page and a chat forum, the latter receiving 25,000 hits each month.

One of CX's most innovative features is its accreditation system. It's an assessment of couriers by couriers, allowing companies to build up a star rating depending on their performance and reliability. This enables customers to reduce the risk of using a previously unknown company.

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"Small companies are able to get the accreditation that large companies get through advertising."

It has recently launched an insurance forum and an integrated booking system.

The latter allows subscribers to raise purchase orders on the site, sending delivery and collection details too.

There are numerous other services in the pipeline, including an on-line credit checking facility.

No matter how high-tech the company's IT system is, the age-old problem of customer poaching will never be eradicated. This is something that is sure to dissuade a number of courier companies from joining the scheme.

David Cameron from Sprint Express in Bristol says: "It's a problem that we are only too aware of. On several occasions we have used subbies who have tried to steal contracts from us by handing out their own business cards."

Cresswell confirms that CX doesn't have an anti-poaching rule but stresses that it is definitely frowned upon. He says: "We would warn people not to do something stupid for a couple of deliveries as it is likely to jeopardise their relationship with other CX couriers."

CX is currently working on a system that it hopes will eradicate the problem. Until then, nervous couriers can always use the CX member to do the trunking, doing the last mile delivery themselves.

Rather than work on a commission basis, Courier Exchange makes its money by charging each company an annual fee. This figure remains the same no matter how many vehicles are in the couriers fleet.

Unlike some rival sites, [www.courierexchange.com](http://www.courierexchange.com) can be viewed without a password. "I think it's only fair if people are allowed to window shop before deciding whether they want to purchase," says Cresswell.