

How Courier Exchange aims to consolidate its lead

Web site operator Courier Exchange claims to have been the first to serve the same-day freight market. Peter Rowlands hears its philosophy from founder and managing director Lyall Cresswell



If any sector of the logistics market needed a freight exchange, it must be the same-day courier business.

Put yourself in the position of a despatch clerk. An urgent job comes up without advance warning; you send a van a hundred miles up the road; yet you've had no time to arrange a paying back-load for it. How marvellous if you could log on to a Web site where you would find a whole list of couriers who need freight moved from the distant area back to your own – and need it moved *today*. Problem solved.

Well, you can. For the past two years a Web site called the Courier Exchange, or CX, has been offering exactly this service as part of a much wider package of resources aimed exclusively at the courier market. That is to say, it is designed specifically to allow courier companies to trade with other courier companies. Rival sites have popped up since then, but Courier Exchange was where it all began (in the UK at least); and in its two years of operation it seems to have picked up enough critical mass to guarantee it a leading role in the market it serves.

Lyall Cresswell, the man who started it all, says it is now "probably the biggest virtual courier operation in the UK." Yet he is under no illusion that the site offers some kind of miracle that was never available before. He acknowledges that successful couriers build up their own networks of contacts all over the country, and usually have a pretty good idea who to phone if they need a back-load. "They wouldn't last long if they didn't," he comments.

"Commissions cloud the issue, and would beg the question of who we were actually working for. They imply mixed incentives."

Lyall Cresswell
Courier Exchange

He should know; back in the 1990s he ran his own courier business, Mailpack Worldwide, which he eventually sold to Seabourne Express. "So I've experienced the business from inside," he says. "I understand the culture."

What his Web site offers, he believes, is "a holistic view of the industry". And as he says: "You'd never get the kind of picture we offer from phone calls alone. We provide a breadth of access that was simply not available before from a single source."

What that means in practical terms is that a courier with empty vehicles can call up a list of perhaps several hundred pending jobs throughout the country, complete with contact details, while a courier with freight to move can see a similar list of empty vehicles available that day.

Significantly, though, Lyall Cresswell is keen to emphasise that Courier Exchange is not a freight exchange as such. "We've never attempted to stand in the middle of transactions between couriers and take

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 Courier Exchange

There were 141 loads available when this search was made. Only paid-up subscribers can now see loads, although anyone can view spare capacity

a commission," he says. "We simply offer a place where couriers can 'pitch their stand', and sell their own wares."

He says he's avoided the commission-based route for the very good reason that "people are instinctively distrustful of them." As he puts it: "Commissions cloud the issue, and would beg the question of who we were actually working for. They imply mixed incentives."

Not that the site is run out of altruism, of course. In its early days it did rely on advertising revenue, but for the past year it has been selling subscriptions to participating companies, and now about a fifth of the 2,000-odd registered organisations and individuals are paid-up members.

That proportion could now be set to rise steeply. In November Cresswell took the significant step of

"People will still ring the courier to make the actual booking. You can't automate the human element – or not yet, anyway."

restricting access to live loads to paying subscribers. Up to then it had been open to all, but he has made the judgement that enough people now rely on the service for him to be able to insist on payment. In any case, the rates are not prohibitive; for instance, it costs companies £30 a month for UK membership and £83 for Europe-wide membership (there is a growing international dimension, of which more later). Individual drivers pay lower fees.

Interestingly, though, access to data on empty vehicles has not been restricted in this way. When we were preparing this article, for example, we were able to browse freely through details of no fewer than 288 vehicles available for back-loading. In itself, that

search

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CX STAR RATING

★★★★

Courier Exchange's new directory is smartly presented, and offers plenty of detail on carriers, as well as featuring its star rating system