



Unsigned, unsealed... DELIVERED

Experimenter tests USPS' sense of humor

Ask letter carriers about the strangest thing they've had to deliver on their routes and you'll get some appropriately strange answers: adult-sized hula hoops, a broom (unwrapped), a desk chair (unboxed), a cowboy boot (unwrapped), a large homemade cookie with the address written in icing, and every conceivable kind of bug or small animal. Some carriers even deliver human remains and body parts. It seems like anything that can be shipped probably has been.*

Jeff Van Bueren decided to put that idea to the test. Writing in *The Annals of Improbable Research*, a humorous science-based magazine, Van Bueren tested the Postal Service by mailing an assortment of strange and unwieldy objects—usually unpackaged—to see if they'd get through. He was surprised at his high success rate:

- ✓ An in-bloom rose with a tag attached to the stem arrived at the address three days later with the beaten-up bud still attached.
- ✓ A fresh green coconut with the address written on the husk arrived 10 days after being mailed from Hawaii.
- ✗ A helium balloon with the address written in magic marker on the side was

refused at the clerk's station because it involved "the transportation of helium" and was "not wrapped."

✓ A molar tooth mailed in a clear plastic box arrived 10 days later with a handwritten note that read, "Please be advised that human remains may not be transported through the mail, but we assumed this to be of sentimental value, and made an exception in your case."

Van Bueren's tongue-in-cheek article, "Postal Experiments," was published 10 years ago and is still touted on blogs and websites to this day. "People love it," he said in a recent interview. After it was published, he heard from many carriers who "were very appreciative of the respect for the risks that they take, [and that] it actually involves much more than ordinary citizens are aware of."

Van Bueren, a technical editor who works from his home in San Francisco, recalls that in the late 1990s, he frequently sent manuscripts back and forth through the mail. One day he received back a nixie of a burned and shredded remnant of a letter. As it still had the return address, the Postal Service was able to return it to him.

"This was an indicator to me that the Post Office was going to do everything it could to either send it forward or

return it,” he said. “So that gave me the idea, ‘What will they send?’”

He and half a dozen friends proceeded to map out the project, with help from an unlikely source—the Postal Service itself. As Van Bueren noted in his article, they discussed some of the mailings, “in a limited and very hypothetical manner,” with USPS informational call center employees. They then gathered the material to send—with “abundant postage”—and either took the materials to the clerks at the desk or dropped them in collection boxes.

The article scientifically breaks down the mailings into several categories, including “valuable,” “unwieldy” and “pointless.” Van Bueren and his friends sent items ranging from \$1 and \$20 bills in clear envelopes to an unpackaged feather duster, a single ski and a large wheel of cheese. All went through, though the recipients sometimes got odd looks or chastisement when they picked up the items at local post offices. The ski arrived postage-due, and “upon pick-up at the station, the clerk and supervisor consulted a book of postage regulations together for two minutes and 40 seconds before deciding on additional postage fee to assess,” the article stated. “Clerk asked if [the recipient] knew how this had been mailed.”

A deer tibia also prompted some questions, of a more personal nature: “The clerk put on rubber gloves before handling the bone, inquired if our researcher were a ‘cultist.’”

While the researchers sometimes had trouble with the clerks, many letter carriers seemed to enjoy delivering the items. Upon delivering an unpackaged football, the article notes that the carrier “was talkative and asked recipient about the scores of various current games.”

Not everything made it through, including a bald tire, a can of soup, and the failure item Van Bueren was most surprised about: an unwrapped brick. A wrapped brick passed through, sort of, as

the recipient received a notice of attempted delivery. However, when he went to pick up his package, the article states that the recipient “received a plastic bag containing broken and pulverized remnants of brick. Inside was a small piece of paper with a number on it [that was later discovered to be] some type of U.S. Drug Enforcement Agency release slip.”

For years afterward, Van Bueren thought of other things he should have tried sending through the mail, but he knows that he’ll never get the chance to continue the experiment. “There was a great historical change on September 11, 2001,” he said, “and it immediately made the experiment a period piece. Lighthearted was suddenly out—especially after the anthrax scare—and sober security was in. And I wasn’t going to go further with it after that.”

One thing that came through for Van Bueren was a hearty respect for the people who make up the Postal Service. “It’s an automated process, and yet, there’s always the need for personal intervention—someone has to read the address to figure it out—and this will always be a permanent part of the process no matter how automated it is,” he said recently.

As a lover of postal history, he considers the Postal Service a vital institution for American society, one he hopes will remain a part of the fabric of the nation. “We, and all scientists, owe a debt of gratitude to these civil servants,” he concluded in the article.

He also hopes that it always maintains its collective sense of humor about the foibles of a public that will put just about anything into its hands for safe and secure delivery.

*On our Facebook page, we asked: “What’s the strangest item you’ve seen sent through the mail?” The responses were as numerous as they were ridiculous. While we listed a few at the beginning of this article, you can read all of them, along with following the link to Jeff Van Bueren’s “Postal Experiments” story, by going to nalc.org/news/precord/articles-index.html.



Among the items that Van Bueren tried to send through the mail were a can of soup (opposite page) and a hammer.

One letter carrier reported seeing an unboxed office chair sent through the mail stream.

