

Easing the rush

Holiday tips for mailing gifts

Like it or not, last-minute Christmas shopping is part of the holiday tradition — even for people who must mail gifts out of state.

You can thank the Wright Brothers and the U.S. Postal Service as well as a growing host of competitive express mailers for that twelfth-hour overnight boost you may need to ensure that Santa's arrival is on time.

You can speed mail practically anything, from a coloring book to a railroad boxcar, if you ask the right service and have enough money to do it.

Moreover, if it is an emergency, you even can find a service that operates 24 hours a day. But be forewarned, you will pay top dollar for that kind of shipping. Following are some tips from the U.S. Postal Service to ensure that your shipped gift arrives on time and in good shape.

CONTAINERS: Fiberboard boxes, like the ones you can get from liquor stores and other retailers, are ideal. Also, popular-size boxes and mailing envelopes or bags are available at stationers and post office branches.

PACKING: Cushion box contents with crumpled newspaper. Place the crumpled paper around all sides, corners, top and bottom so contents don't move when the box is shaken. Also, foam shells or air-pocket padding sold by stores are good.

Padded mailing envelopes (or bags) are ideal for small items, including books.

Use only the box — brown paper and cording are not necessary. Put a slip of paper with name and address of the recipient inside the box as well as addressing it on the outside.

SEALING: Close the carton with one of the three recommended types of tape: pressure-sensitive, nylon-reinforced paper or glass-reinforced pressure-sensitive.

ADDRESSING: Use smudge-proof ink. Put the recipient's address in the lower right portion of the package. Put your return address in the upper left corner of only one side of the package. Remove all other labels from the box. Use ZIP codes. A wrong ZIP can delay delivery.

CHRISTMAS CARDS: Holiday cards should be a standard size. Envelopes must be at least 3½ inches high and five inches long. If the card is extra large, you may have to pay added postage. If in doubt, have it measured by a postal clerk.

And time it right.

You are advised to mail "early in the month and early in the day" by Jerry Vega, a postal information officer.

If you are mailing across the continent, the U.S. Postal Service advises to allow eight to 10 days for packages and cards.

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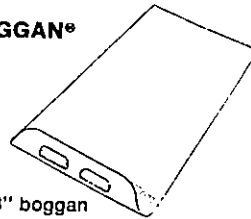
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