



The doorstep decides

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Why delivery
model design
is now a brand
strategy decision

GLS.
Parcels to People



Executive summary

The customer experience doesn't end at checkout. Every delivery represents a moment when a brand's promise is either reinforced or put at risk.

As consumer expectations rise, the final mile has become an increasingly important part of the customer experience. Yet many businesses continue to evaluate parcel delivery primarily through transportation rates, transit times, and geographic coverage.

This white paper examines why a broader approach matters. From package handling and tracking visibility to delivery consistency and exception management, the right delivery strategy can influence customer satisfaction, operational efficiency, and the true cost of fulfillment.

To help shippers evaluate their delivery networks, this paper introduces the 3 As of Delivery Network Evaluation:

Access

Reaching the customers and markets that matter to your business.

Alignment

Matching your delivery model to your products, handling requirements, and customer expectations.

Accountability

Establishing clear responsibility for the delivery experience, from pickup to doorstep.

Together, these three considerations provide a practical framework for evaluating delivery networks beyond transportation rates alone.

Because the delivery experience isn't separate from your brand. It's an extension of it.



● Introduction

The last impression

A retail or eCommerce brand spends months, sometimes years, earning a customer's trust. It invests in product development, brand identity, digital experience, and customer service. Then it puts that investment in a box and hands it to someone else.

That handoff, the final mile from distribution center to doorstep, is the last impression the brand makes on its customer. And for most retail and eCommerce brands shipping today, it is the part of the experience they control least.



Recent research makes the connection even clearer. AlixPartners' 2026 Home Delivery Survey¹ found that more than 85% of consumers say a poor delivery experience reduces their willingness to repurchase. Even more telling, 84% say their past delivery experiences, including which provider is used and whether the driver is a gig worker, directly influence where they choose to shop.

These numbers would concern any logistics leader. But they take on greater significance alongside a shift reshaping the delivery landscape: the growth of gig-based delivery. At the same time, the parcel market itself is becoming more fragmented.

Pitney Bowes² reported that 'other' or alternative carriers were the fastest-growing U.S. parcel segment in 2025, increasing volume 127% year over year. That category includes both established regional parcel carriers such as GLS and newer last-mile startups operating gig-style delivery networks.

This paper examines what that shift means for retail and eCommerce brands and why delivery model design is no longer simply a logistics decision. It is a brand strategy decision.

Key insight 1

The delivery landscape is changing

For most of the past two decades, the carrier conversation for retail shippers has centered on a familiar set of trade-offs: speed versus cost, national coverage versus regional precision, reliability versus flexibility. Those trade-offs remain real. But a new variable has entered the equation, one that most brands have not yet fully priced into their carrier decisions.



Gig-based delivery, app-dispatched independent contractors working flexible hours in their own personal vehicles, has grown from a niche last-mile option to a mainstream delivery option. The economic appeal is straightforward: asset-light gig models can operate with a different cost structure than dedicated delivery networks, creating the potential for lower per-package rates.

The appeal is understandable. Regional parcel delivery providers can already offer 10–40% savings on in-zone deliveries compared to higher-cost options³, while gig-based models may offer additional opportunities to reduce per-package costs. For brands managing thin margins in a competitive eCommerce environment, those savings are hard to ignore.

Regional parcel delivery providers offer

10-40%
savings on in-zone deliveries

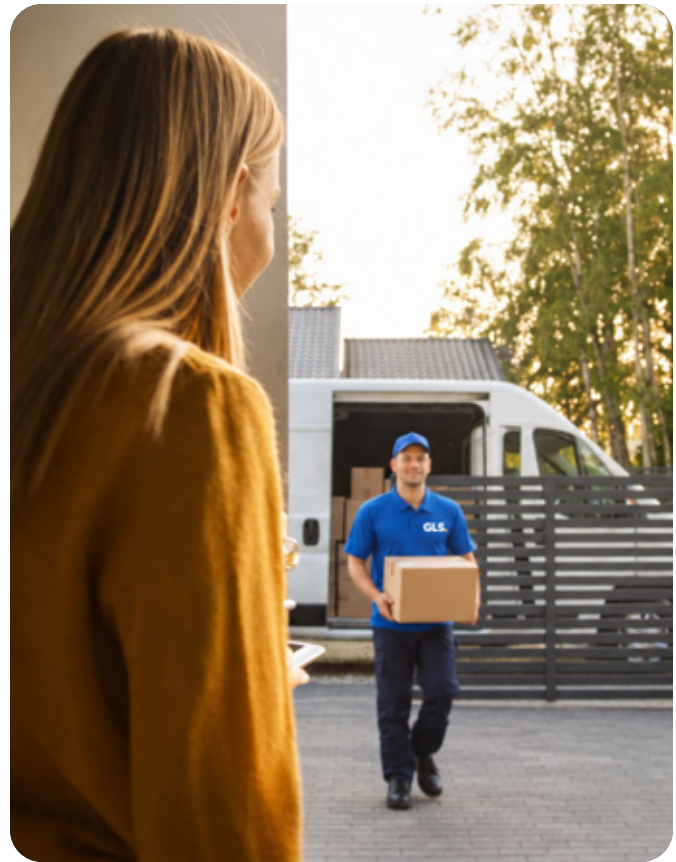


→ ● The customer doesn't see the rate card. They see who shows up at their door, and they hold the brand accountable for that experience.

But the rate card is not the full picture. Different delivery models create different levels of consistency and control over who delivers the package, how it is handled, what condition it arrives in, and what impression is left at the door.

Dedicated delivery networks are structured around defined service standards, established routes, purpose-built delivery operations, and clear accountability for the customer experience. Gig-based models are structured differently, typically using app-dispatched drivers and personal vehicles with assignments that can change based on availability and demand. Depending on how the network is designed and managed, that can introduce greater variability in route familiarity, package handling, vehicle presentation, and the doorstep experience.

As research from Merchants Fleet⁴ notes, factors such as lower route efficiency, higher turnover, and inconsistent service standards can end up directly affecting brand image in ways that are difficult to measure before they become visible in customer feedback.



Gig-based delivery can be executed well. The question for brands is whether the model provides the consistency, visibility, service standards, and accountability their customer experience requires. And those structural characteristics are worth understanding before they show up in customer feedback.

Key insight 2

The real cost of a poor delivery experience

Delivery failures have always been costly. What has changed is how quickly those costs can compound and how readily a poor delivery experience can become a reflection of the brand itself, not simply a logistics problem.



85%

of consumers say a poor delivery experience reduces their willingness to repurchase.

- AlixPartners 2026 Home Delivery Survey

Consumers have little patience for execution failures. Bringg's⁵ 2026 Delivery Experience Study found that 50% of shoppers have stopped buying from a retailer because of a negative delivery experience, while 35% have permanently abandoned a retailer following a late delivery. The finding reinforces a fundamental shift in the economics of the last mile: delivery failures do not simply generate service costs; they can cost the retailer the customer.

The reputational exposure is equally significant. Research from ClickPost⁸ found that nearly half of Gen Z and millennial consumers have shared a negative delivery experience on social media. A single poor delivery, in the hands of a dissatisfied younger shopper, can reach thousands of potential customers within hours.

The underlying dynamic is reliability. Bringg's⁵ 2026 Delivery Experience Study found that 73% of shoppers say on-time arrival defines a great delivery experience. Stord's⁶ 2025 Mystery Shopping Report reinforces that finding: consumers prioritize reliability over speed. Brands that consistently deliver on their promise — even without competing on ultra-fast shipping — build the trust that sustains long-term loyalty. Those that overpromise and underdeliver face disproportionate reputational damage and churn. The delivery model determines which of those outcomes is more likely.



● The hidden math of delivery failures

The cost-benefit analysis for gig delivery typically looks like this: lower per-package rate, multiplied by volume, equals significant savings. It is a compelling calculation on paper.

What that model rarely accounts for is the cost of delivery failure. Earlier research from Loqate⁷ estimated the average cost of a failed delivery at \$17.20 per package, and that figure may not fully capture the downstream costs including customer service time, reshipment expenses, goodwill discounts, and the lifetime value of the customers who quietly don't return.

→ ● **\$17.20**
Per package

When those downstream costs are modeled alongside per-package rates, the economics of a delivery decision can look very different from the headline transportation savings. The right comparison is not simply rate versus rate. It is the total cost of delivering the customer experience your brand has promised.

Key insight 3

Evaluating the alternatives

The alternative to gig delivery is a different operating model, one built around accountability, consistency, and a delivery experience that reflects the brand rather than diluting it.

Dedicated delivery infrastructure has several structural characteristics that gig models cannot easily replicate:



Dedicated service providers

In a dedicated delivery model, service providers can develop greater familiarity with established routes, neighborhoods, access points, and delivery requirements over time. They know the neighborhoods, the access points, the customers. That consistency can reduce failed delivery attempts, improve package handling, and support a doorstep interaction that feels professional and intentional — not anonymous and transactional.

Driver turnover can be a significant operational challenge in last-mile delivery. High turnover means constant retraining, inconsistent service, and a higher probability of handling errors. Dedicated operating models produce lower turnover, higher route familiarity, and more accountable service outcomes through consistent route assignments and ongoing service standards.

Branded presence at the door

A branded vehicle on a residential street is not just a logistics asset. It is a brand impression. For eCommerce brands that have no physical retail presence, the delivery provider arriving in a recognizable, professionally presented vehicle may be the only human interaction their customer has with anything connected to the purchase.

That moment – the driver, the vehicle, the handling of the package – is the brand at the door. A dedicated model gives brands confidence about what that moment looks like. A gig model arguably does not.



Visual proof of delivery and real-time visibility

Modern logistics operations have invested heavily in delivery confirmation technology: geo-stamped Visual Proof of Delivery (POD) photographs, real-time tracking updates, geo-fencing notifications, and delivery window communications. Together, these tools keep customers informed and reduce the anxiety and customer service volume associated with uncertain delivery timing. Consumers increasingly expect that visibility as part of the delivery experience. Bringg's⁵ 2026 research identifies live tracking and proactive communication as core elements of reliable delivery, reinforcing that customers evaluate not only whether an order arrives, but how informed and in control they feel along the way.

These capabilities serve two functions simultaneously. For the customer, they create transparency and confidence. For the brand, they create documentation including evidence of successful, professional delivery that protects against false non-delivery claims and provides a clear chain of accountability from pickup to doorstep.

Lower damage rates

Package damage can be one of the most direct and measurable brand costs in last-mile delivery. A product that arrives damaged is not just a refund or a reship, it is a customer whose first experience with the physical product was disappointment.

Dedicated delivery infrastructure, with consistent service providers and consistent handling standards, can deliver better outcomes on parcel damage. GLS US operates with a damage rate of 0.018% and a total claim rate of 0.09% across its Western US network — figures that reflect a delivery model built around service consistency, fewer handoffs, and handling standards that treat every parcel as a brand touchpoint, not just a unit of volume. According to Stord's⁶ 2025 mystery shopping data, 12% of products across brands studied arrived with some form of issue — a rate that purpose-built dedicated delivery infrastructure is specifically designed to push well below industry averages.



The market has taken notice. AlixPartners' 2026 Home Delivery Survey found that 55% of retailers now use providers outside UPS, FedEx and USPS, while more than one-third shifted volume away from traditional incumbents during the previous year. Carrier diversification is increasingly becoming a structural strategy for reducing risk, expanding geographic reach, and building more resilient delivery networks.

Key insight 4

Understanding delivery model trade-offs

Not all delivery models are built to serve the same geographies or shipment types equally. As gig-based delivery has grown, it is worth understanding the structural limitations that can affect how these services perform and what those limitations mean for brands that depend on consistent, reliable delivery across a range of markets and zip codes.

Many gig delivery platforms concentrate their service areas in densely populated urban markets. Coverage in suburban and more rural zip codes can be limited or inconsistent which may leave gaps in a shipper's ability to reach all of their customers reliably. For brands whose customer base extends beyond dense metro areas, this geographic constraint is a meaningful operational consideration.

Personal vehicle size is another practical constraint. Gig drivers typically use their own passenger vehicles, which limits the volume per delivery run and can affect how packages are loaded, handled, and protected in transit. This is particularly true for larger, heavier, or more fragile shipments.

Gig delivery models can also introduce more complexity into the delivery chain. Where a dedicated regional parcel delivery provider manages pickup, transit, and final delivery within a single accountable network, gig-based models may involve separate parties handling first mile, middle mile, and final mile. Each handoff introduces a new point of variability, reducing the visibility and accountability that brands depend on for a consistent customer experience.

Regional parcel delivery providers focused on a defined geography operate with dedicated vehicles purpose-built for parcel delivery, consistent routes, and accountability within a single network addressing the structural limitations gig models can introduce.

For brands that depend on consistent, professional delivery across both urban and suburban markets, understanding these structural differences is an important part of evaluating the right delivery model. Package size ranges, clear accountability from pickup to doorstep, and geographic coverage are all worth examining when selecting a delivery partner.

The 3 As of delivery network evaluation



Access

Does your delivery network reach the customers and markets that matter to your business?



Alignment

Is your delivery model suited to your products, shipment characteristics, handling requirements, and customer expectations?



Accountability

Is there clear responsibility for the delivery experience, from pickup to doorstep?

Key insight 5

The doorstep test

Five questions to ask about your delivery network

Logistics decisions are rarely made in a single meeting. They accumulate over time through contract renewals, cost reduction initiatives, peak season capacity decisions, and the gradual addition of lower-cost options that each seem reasonable in isolation.

The result, for many retail and eCommerce brands, is a provider mix that is optimized for cost but not evaluated for brand risk. The following questions are designed to prompt that evaluation.



What you measure shapes what you optimize.

If delivery decisions are measured primarily by rate and transit time, important parts of the customer experience can remain invisible until something goes wrong.

01. **Who is actually delivering your packages?**

Can you describe with confidence who shows up at your customers' doors? Are they service providers with a consistent, dedicated relationship to your delivery network?

02. **What does the delivery experience look like from your customer's perspective?**

Have you mystery-shopped your own delivery? Do you know what vehicle arrives, how the package is handled, what the driver interaction looks and feels like? The brand experience at the door is something most logistics leaders have never personally observed.

03. **Are you modeling the full cost of delivery failure?**

Your cost analysis likely captures per-package rates and surcharges. Does it also capture the cost of failed first-attempt deliveries, customer service contacts related to delivery issues, refunds and reshipping, and the estimated lifetime value impact of customers who churn after a poor delivery experience?



04. **Is your delivery network built for your geography?**

Where is your volume concentrated, and can your delivery provider serve it consistently including suburban and rural zip codes, not just dense urban markets? If your current provider's coverage is constrained by geography or service area limitations, it may be worth evaluating whether further diversification across delivery providers better serves your customers.

05. **What would your customer say about how their last delivery went?**

This is the simplest question and often the most revealing. If you don't know the answer, and if you're not systematically measuring delivery satisfaction as part of the customer experience, it is worth finding out before the next contract renewal.

Every logistics leader knows their per-package rate. Very few know what a poor delivery experience is costing them in customer lifetime value. That's the number that should be driving the conversation.

-JoDawn Whitlock, CEO, GLS US

Conclusion

The doorstep is a brand decision



The final mile has always been one of the hardest parts of the customer experience to control. What has changed is the stakes. Consumers have more choices, more ways to share dissatisfaction, and less patience when a brand promise breaks down at the doorstep.

That makes delivery model design more than a transportation decision. Rates, transit times, and coverage still matter. But so do consistency, visibility, package handling, accountability, and the experience delivered at the door.

The brands that evaluate delivery through both an operational and customer-experience lens will be better positioned to understand the true value of their delivery network.

The doorstep decides. The question is whether your provider is built to deliver on what your brand has promised.



● About GLS US

Built on decades of logistics experience, GLS US delivers dependable parcel service across the Western United States through a focused regional network. Branded delivery and technology that keeps customers informed create a trusted experience from the first to the final mile. GLS US is part of the GLS Group — one of Europe's largest parcel service providers, delivering across more than 50 countries and transporting over 977 million parcels annually.

For more information, visit gls-us.com.





Sources & citations

Sources include current 2026 research and selected earlier studies retained where they provide relevant data not replicated in newer publications. Links verified at time of publication.

- [1] AlixPartners [2026 Home Delivery Survey](#)
- [2] PitneyBowes [Parcel Shipping Index](#)
- [3] ShipBob — [How Regional Parcel Carriers Work & Improve Your Ecommerce Business 2025](#)
- [4] Merchants Fleet — [Last Mile Delivery Explained: Trends, Challenges, Costs 2025](#)
- [5] Bringg — [2026 Delivery Experience Study](#)
- [6] Stord — [2025 Mystery Shopping Report: What Consumers Expect and Are Brands Delivering](#)
- [7] Loqate — [Fixing Failed Deliveries 2021](#)
- [8] ClickPost — [Last Mile Delivery Statistics 2025](#)

