

Making a List, Checking It Twice

Roadie promises to help last-last minute holiday shoppers get gifts under the tree on time

by PETER JOHNSTON

For the first time in more than a decade, Christmas Eve falls on a Sunday this year. And the millions who will put off buying that special gift until, say, late afternoon on Saturday, December 23 — or maybe even sometime Sunday — will have a problem getting a gift to its intended recipient. Hardly anybody delivers on Sunday.

“Amazon really is at an advantage this year, due to their partnership with USPS — which is the only carrier that will deliver on Sunday,” says Jamie Gottlieb. “Other retailers will either have to cut off their online Christmas sales early or pay extra in expedited shipping to make sure those last-minute gifts get delivered on time.”

Gottlieb leads social media at Roadie, an Atlanta-based delivery service that uses an app to connect people who want something delivered from A to B with drivers who, for their own reasons, are already on the way from A to B — or will be soon — and would be willing to take a package along and deliver it.

The company was the brainchild of serial entrepreneur Marc Gorlin, who needed to get something from Birmingham, Ala., to Perdido Key, Fla., and was frustrated by being told it would take four days.

That was three years ago; today there are nearly 50,000 drivers in the Roadie network, according to Gottlieb. A sender takes a picture of whatever it is they want to send and provides it, along with a description of the job, to Roadie. Roadie posts it on the map; drivers going between the pickup and drop-off points essentially bid for the delivery.

“These are all pre-verified drivers,” Gottlieb says. “We ask for their license, their Social Security number, their insurance and their bank account information. We have real-time tracking,

and we partner with UPS Capital to offer coverage of up to \$10,000. \$500 is automatic on every shipment, which is five times as much as any other carrier.”

Gottlieb says the company has delivered packages in over 4,000 cities nationwide. “We send a huge variety of merchandise,” she says. “One of our customers, a big-box retailer in over 10 markets, uses us to deliver everything from riding lawnmowers to chicken coops. We also work with an airline in more than 30 markets across the country delivering delayed luggage.”

PERSONAL SERVICE

One regular Roadie customer is Four Oak Bed Swings of Montgomery, Ala.

Four Oak was founded by David Belser, who, like Marc Gorlin, had a vision — in Belser’s case, a vision of doing something with his life besides preparing writs and filing lawsuits. “Nearly everybody in my family is a lawyer,” he says. “I was the only stray.”

When he left his home in Montgomery, instead of going to law school he went to the family’s farm in neighboring Macon County, where he began to teach himself woodworking in addition to taking care of the farm and going to college online. “I was largely self-taught,” he says. “I’d look at something and try to replicate it.”

One day while visiting a friend, Belser spent a few minutes relaxing in a bed swing on the front porch. (A bed swing



is exactly what it sounds like: You build a frame big enough to hold a mattress, give it arms and a back, provide plenty of cushions to rest against, put a rope at each corner and hang it somewhere.) “I loved it,” he says, “and I think almost anybody who has ever sat in one has felt the same way.”

Acting on this conviction, Belser studied the swing’s construction and made one for himself. Then he moved to the Pike Road area of Montgomery, set up a woodworking shop and started Four Oak Designs, which specializes in custom-made bed swings, tables and flooring.

Four Oak makes bed swings in any mattress size from twin to king — a lot of them. Belser says output averages about one bed swing per day; as of October he expected to finish the main selling season with a backlog of about 50 orders.

A bed swing, even a twin size, makes for a considerable package. You’d expect a driver for a service like Roadie to be a little put off by a project like that, but Belser says the ones he works with manage just fine. “Every now and then I’ll have somebody call about taking one, not realizing how big it is, but most people are in a truck, or will even get a trailer if they feel like they need to.”

The rates are comparable to those of other shippers, he says, but the service

tends to be better. “It saves me, because with the other shippers I still use now and then, I have to crate and package everything just so, because it’s got to go on the 18-wheelers. So that’s about \$60 I have to spend on material to ship out the swing.

“With the Roadies, I don’t have to do that. I’ll help them load it, and explain that they’ll need two people to unload, and they’ll take it from there. It’s a little bit more personalized, and you get less damage than with the freight companies.”

LAST-MINUTE SANTA

And, as noted, Roadie clients get a pretty good chance of getting even a very almost-forgotten Christmas present delivered — even on Sunday. Asked what kind of deadline she thought Roadie could make, Jamie Gottlieb says, “Suppose it’s five o’clock Sunday afternoon, and you’re in New York City at Macy’s Herald Square. You just bought a present that needs to be in Connecticut that night.”

Or, alternatively, Macy’s — or any retailer — has a customer with that

problem. What do they do? “If you think about it,” says Gottlieb, “91 percent of travel happens by car during Christmas. A lot of people have family any direction you can think of from the city, including Connecticut. So, yeah. With us, you’d probably make it.”

And you might even get a snack out of it. Some people don’t want the driver coming to their house, or it doesn’t work for the driver. To accommodate such situations, Roadie has an arrangement with Waffle House.

“They’re our Roadie roadhouses,” Gottlieb says. “You can meet at the Waffle House, exchange the item — and get a free waffle and coffee on us.” **STORES**

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