

The paper Route

Every teenage boy needs a paper route. It teaches him discipline, responsibility, economics, customer relations, and how to rise early in the morning. Besides, he needs a source of income to purchase those essentials a young man begins to need; comic books, gum, bike parts, and with time, date money.

Delivering newspapers was a great way to start a growing enterprise if you had the energy, drive, and management skills. One of my oldest friends in Litchfield, Illinois, Ron Sharff, brokered a fledgling paper route into control of the complete circulation department for the Litchfield Herald News by the time he graduated from high school. He didn't stop there, but completed a business degree in college, went on to the Harvard Business School, began a chain of senior living homes, and retired a multimillionaire by the time he turned forty.

Now, most of us who had a paper route didn't build such an empire but did make good money on a first job and had some interesting stories to tell. That was my experience. I started delivering newspapers for the St. Louis County Observer in Maplewood, Missouri, a paper delivered free to subscribers who would donate a fee for the delivery service, if they chose. I started with a route of about 100 customers near my home, but eventually graduated to 200 customers, and then 400 customers, each expansion farther from home.

One problem for parents whose son runs a paper route is, they must pick up the pieces and deliver the papers when he gets sick or has an unchangeable commitment on delivery day. Fortunately, the Observer was only delivered one day each week and the actual delivery day could be slipped by a day occasionally, due to inclement weather. Occasionally, warm, sunny days became inclement days, if an "emergency" arose. The content of the paper was mostly shopping coupons anyway, so the only real damage might occur if a serious coupon clipper didn't get his paper until the sale was over.

But, 400 deliveries were a massive amount of work for one delivery boy or girl before dark, after school in the winter. Most deliveries were done by throwing a folded paper from a moving bicycle. The fine art of steering a bike with one hand,

finding a folded paper in the bag draped across the handlebars with the other, without taking your eye off the sidewalk, and tossing the paper onto a porch or sidewalk, took some time to develop. Balancing the bike; avoiding cars, ruts, people, and small animals; and delivering the paper accurately, were prime attributes of a good delivery person. Only once during my career of delivering papers did I break a window. The person whose window I broke forgave my mistake by "letting" me repair his window the following Saturday.

I loved delivering newspapers by bike, but I made a mistake one time by accepting a new paper route without checking it over first. When I went to deliver the papers on my new route the first time, I found the buildings were all three-story apartments. I had to park my bike in front of each building, run up three flights of stairs, and drop two papers on each landing. Running up and down the stairs of thirty apartment building was extremely exhausting.

Delivery of the papers was the most glamorous part of the news business. But, there were two other parts you have yet to hear about. Each Wednesday before I got home from school, a large delivery truck would drop off bundles of newspapers in front of my house. My first task was to open the bundles and fold each paper into the shape of a four-sided, flat disk that could be tossed across the yard like a Frisbee. The paper had to be folded so the four sides tucked tightly together, and not fly open on its voyage through the air. Then the disks had to be stacked in the newspaper bag, so they could be located without looking down, and retrieved with one hand. All these skills were acquired and reinforced with spills and thrills while riding a bicycle. It was much like watching acrobats on bicycles at the circus.

Last, but not least, was the financial payoff of the entire enterprise. The cost of printing and production of the paper was covered from advertising fees, but the circulation costs were collected by voluntary donations to the delivery boys. If you could develop good relations with your customers, you were more likely to make more money. Only a small part of this relationship came from the deliveries, because you seldom ever saw the customer when you delivered their papers. Of course, if you consistently tossed their paper in the bushes or on the roof, you weren't likely to get a donation, let alone a tip.

If you had a winning personality when customers answered the door for the collection once a month, you were more likely to clean up on collection fees. Normally, you had to convince them that the paper was free, but your delivery services should merit some reward. The delivery person needed to "reach out and touch" the customer with his charisma.

I had one customer which seemed to want to "reach out and touch" me. I knocked on the door of a home I had never gotten a response from before. No one answered at first, but when I was about to walk away, the door slowly opened, and a beautiful, thirty-year old woman stood on the other side of the screen, clad only in a bikini. I had never seen a bikini before. That was in the early '50s, and such a daring display of skin was unheard of, yet.

She asked, "Yes, what can I do for you?"

I gulped, took a step backwards, and said, "Uhh, uhh, ..., newspaper. Observer. Uhh, ..., collection?"

She replied calmly, "Oh, yes. Just a moment," and disappeared back into the house.

She was gone for a few minutes while I thought to myself, "Should I stay? Should I leave? What's she doing? Oh boy, this is awkward!"

She returned, opened the screen slightly, and pushed through a five-dollar bill. Then, closing the door, she smiled and said, "Thanks for the paper."

I tried collecting at that same house for several months afterward, but no one ever came to the door again.