

# Shopping Online Doesn't Necessarily Reduce Traffic

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## Business

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Ordering stuff online instead of driving to the mall might not be reducing traffic congestion after all, but adding to it, as Amazon vans and UPS trucks delivering those goods clog our streets.

AUDIE CORNISH, HOST:

Nobody likes getting stuck in traffic. It's one of many reasons people go online to order everything from clothes to paper towels. Yet, those deliveries may be adding to traffic congestion. Think about it. One trip to the mall is replaced by six or eight package deliveries, plus all the trucks needed to stock fulfillment centers. From Chicago, NPR's David Schaper has more.

(SOUNDBITE OF TOOLS HITTING CONCRETE)

DAVID SCHAPER, BYLINE: On this huge vacant lot that is four full square city blocks, workers are breaking up the concrete of an old factory floor. They're making way for a massive new facility that won't make anything but will store and distribute items. Industrial property developer Ryan Stoller can already envision what will go where in the new logistics center.

RYAN STOLLER: Just one row of loading docks kind of right there, where we're looking, south-facing.

SCHAPER: Stoller says this location, just a few miles from the center of downtown Chicago, is unbeatable.

STOLLER: There is just a lack of modern, functional warehouse facilities located in the city of Chicago. So historically, they've had to go out to the suburbs.

SCHAPER: With all of the traffic congestion in the Chicago area, making deliveries from far-flung suburban warehouses could take hours. And, Stoller says, in today's on-demand e-commerce world, time is money.

STOLLER: And we are used to ordering something online and getting it now. And to locate right here, you can service a huge swath of the downtown population in under an hour.

SCHAPER: Stoller and his company are so confident of the location that they're building this distribution facility on spec without tenants even lined up. Given that Amazon recently opened a Prime Now distribution facility a couple of blocks away, it's probably a pretty good bet.

But as e-commerce continues to grow, transportation planners are seeing problems. Liz Schuh is with the Chicago Metropolitan Agency for Planning.

LIZ SCHUH: Overall, we're just seeing a lot more trucks over all of the road network than we used to see.

SCHAPER: Schuh's colleague, transportation planner Elizabeth Irvin, says it's not just the explosive growth of e-commerce that's catching cities off guard, but the rapidly changing delivery models.

ELIZABETH IRVIN: And we've been seeing sort of this evolution from big distribution facilities on the edges of the region, you know, to sort of smaller distribution facilities. And all these communities are trying to keep up.

SCHAPER: Cities are trying to cope with new truck traffic going into and out of fulfillment centers that are located closer to where people live. And Alison Conway, who teaches civil engineering at City College of New York, says even more vehicles are on the roads to deliver those goods.

ALISON CONWAY: A lot of those deliveries are going to happen by smaller vehicles, like, even bicycles, which can kind of more quickly navigate congested urban streets. But overall, it's leading to a big inefficiency.

SCHAPER: There's just a lot more vehicles, from small cars to big, boxy trucks and vans, making deliveries and clogging up streets, especially in residential areas. And what happens when you're not home, or the shoes you ordered don't fit?

CONWAY: Both failed deliveries - and by failure I mean a delivery person trying to make a delivery to a home where there's no one able to accept it and no safe place to leave it - and returns are both hugely challenging issues that come up with e-commerce.

SCHAPER: In dense urban areas, it's not uncommon to find several UPS, FedEx and U.S. Postal trucks double-parked on the same block, choking traffic or blocking bike lanes while, in some cities, it's difficult for delivery drivers to even find a place to park.

IRVIN: There's more and more competing demands for that curb space and the road space.

SCHAPER: Elizabeth Irvin of the Chicago Metropolitan Agency for Planning says some cities are remaking their curb space to accommodate the demand for e-commerce deliveries. One pilot project in Chicago consolidates loading zones to give delivery trucks dedicated space, but then charges them by how long they're parked to move them along more quickly. There's also a push to get companies to make more deliveries at night.

E-commerce and delivery companies, from Amazon to UPS and FedEx, are experimenting with congestion-reducing delivery methods themselves, from using e-bikes and package lockers to smart keys to allow packages to be left in homes. After all, they want to ensure that they can live up to their instantaneous delivery promises, which they can't do if they're stuck in traffic. David Schaper, NPR News, Chicago.

(SOUNDBITE OF MUSIC)

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