



The ship of the dead

When shopping online, you tend to face the lie quite quickly. Spend a certain amount – maybe \$15 or \$20, and your shipment is free. Take advantage of competitive holiday promotions that promise free shipping on any item without the requirement for a minimum. Or subscribe to a service like Amazon Prime, which for \$99 a year in the United States, offers members free shipping on millions of eligible items. But the truth is that, like almost everything else, free shipping. The biggest impact is being felt by e-commerce companies, especially smaller ones, who are facing what some call an emerging crisis: The cost of free shipping is in many cases unsustainable. For many online stores, the price of the free shipment is either folded into item prices or financed by investors. Jerry Storch, CEO of Hudson Bay Road, a brick-and-file giant that includes a Canadian department store in Canada, Lord " Taylor". and Saks Fifth Avenue, says it's much more expensive for retailers like them to deliver products to the customer's front door than to have them shop in the store. For traders who can pay for it, he says, free shipping becomes a leader in loss. This is a very expensive model and is not cheaper than the model of the store. The economy is clear, Storch explained at the e-commerce conference in Las Vegas this spring. Direct home costs along the supply chain are three times higher than that of a store. So when we say that the internet trader can charge less, how can it be? Maybe that's why so many of us have so many problems emulation of amazon's model and make money. That's because it's really expensive and also why Amazon has had trouble making money from merchandising sales. This is a very expensive model and is not cheaper than the model of the store. The cost of free shipping can be particularly onerous for smaller e-commerce companies, but it's even the impact of Amazon and Target, two of the giants often considered responsible for promoting the trend to start. Typically, Amazon recovers only about 55% of the amount it spends on shipping, a number that has made a new check after the company's third-quarter earnings significantly missed expectations. As it expands its Core Service and other recent offerings, Amazon's net shipping costs - the difference between what it pays for delivery and the amount customers pay in shipping fees and Prime memberships - reached nearly \$1.75 billion in the third quarter, the highest quarterly amount ever paid outside according to data collected by GeekWire from the company's earnings reports. In the face of rising transport costs, Amazon is building its own shipping operation and appears to have pushing prime customers to purchase from additional delivery services, such as Prime Pantry. In February, Amazon raised the minimum for free shipping in the United States to \$49, up from \$35, a change repeated in Canada last month. Earlier this year, Target warned store credit card customers they now have to pay a processing fee for special items. Your average customer, of course, doesn't care about supply chains when buying new shower curtains or Bluetooth speakers. Even if the delivery price is folded into the prices of items or memberships, customers usually prefer their purchases at no extra cost. According to a 2016 survey by public relations firm Walker Sands, free shipping is the highest factor that will make customers buy from e-commerce sites more often: 88% of respondents said free shipping was more convincing than easy return or same-day shipping. That's why a wide variety of online retailers offer Free Shipping Day annually on December 16, in an effort to increase holiday sales, and why Best Buy and Target announced that they would offer free shipping for many online purchases at least until Christmas. Still, someone has to pay the shipping price. If customers or investors don't foot the bill, ecommerce companies can easily lose money from any free shipment. This is sustainable if a new round of funding is to come; otherwise, it may plunge into financial uncertainty of a trader or an e-commerce company, especially a smaller one. In fact, free shipping is partly responsible for one of the most prominent crash-and-burns of the 1990s dotcom boom. Pets.com, whose ads are still immersed in the minds of many readers of a certain age, offer free delivery of dog food expensive for a ship. In his book Thinking Inside The Box, author Kirk Cheyfitz explained how low profit margins due to demand for free shipping helped sink the Pets.com. In era of Amazon's Yes buttons, smartphone shopping, and competing new niches such as mattresses and subscription boxes, smaller and medium-sized e-commerce firms are thinking more carefully than ever about how offering free shipping works for their business - or not. Christian von Rickenbach is the co-founder of Helix Sleep, an online retailer that sells custom mattresses and raised \$7.35 million in funding earlier this year. Helix operates in an extremely crowded vertical industry dominated by Casper and where a host of small start-ups are fighting for a dollar for each of the students, who have budget minds, to convenience-obsessed suburban families. Buying a mattress online is different from what people usually do... [Free shipping] makes people more comfortable to buy. Helix customers both free shipping and free returns. As a company, Helix - and any competitor who wants to sell mattresses audience - there is little choice. Casper offers free shipping, as well as rivals Tuft and Needle and Leesa. Christian von Ritzenbach Buying a mattress online is different from what people usually do, Von Rickenbach explained to me. They want to get the product as quickly as possible and make a return; [Free shipping] makes people more comfortable buying the product online. But he said as far as how our pricing is done, delivery somehow has to be paid for. In the case of Helix, the company does what many online retailers do: Work at a bulk rate with a shipping company like UPS. Von Rickenbach told me that his company's price is determined by factors such as the quantity they are delivering, the size of the box and the physical places to which they are delivered. The company has also sought efficacy in its packaging. We spent a lot of time optimizing our packaging to hold on during delivery and fit into size limits to reduce shipping is something where, even if it is not directly passed to the user, it is usually a better model for the user because it allows the company to be more efficient and streamlined with shipping rules. Against the background of a competitive online mattress market, its main goal is not to repel potential customers with additional prices. Free shipping means a much more transparent price experience [for] mattress buyers who are frustrated by hidden fees in retail mattress stores. Other online retailers avoid offering free shipping as much as they can. Since the Wall Street Journal's Laura Stevens recently, smaller online retailers have not benefited from the economies of scale that big competitors like Amazon and Walmart enjoy. Jerry Hum, ceo of Touch modern, an online men's fashion retailer, says his site doesn't offer free shipping, but relies instead on a different tactic to whirl: A sense of community. The store is available as a membership site and uses frequent customer emails to draw them to the homepage as a destination in its own right. Hum was candid when talking to me on the phone: For retailers like his company (which raised \$14 million in series B in 2014), the most effective way to compete with larger e-commerce companies was to specialize in niche - in this case, men's fashion. Touching the modern is one of many online retailers we call average: they have large customer bases and have a relatively large volume of orders, with revenue of \$100 million from February 2016. But they are still small compared to Walmarts and amazons in the world. Like these other touch of modern enters into close links with corporate account managers in general negotiate higher rates. For them and other smaller companies, the prices they receive reveal one of the most disappointing aspects of e-commerce and economies of shipping scale: The more a business trader attracts (often through free shipping) the cheaper these bulky ones become. About Touch modern delivery and logistics (and what customers are charged for delivery) all connections with sales margins and profitability. We treat shipping costs as we do the cost of goods, Hume explained. Whatever we do on our side, it feeds into margins. But on the customer side, it feeds into margins. But on the customer side, whether they pay for delivery as a separate item line or we increase the price to offer free shipping, it does not change much ... Customers are smart to do maths and look at the price they pay. Another retailer, JackThreads, recently embarked on a very expensive initiative: Free shipping and returning a program called TryOuts. JackThreads sends customers free items that they are expected to try out, customers are then charged after seven days if they don't return the item. The highly streamlined process even involves giving prepaid parcels to customers so they can download their unwanted items to the post office without tracking a cardboard box. You bear the cost of shipping by re-shopping, but this conversation does not fit well in an Excel spreadsheet. It is not easy to determine the recurrence rate and the forwarding rate. The company is newcomer to offer free shipping, which it is rollout at the same time as TryOuts. According to chief executive Mark Walker, this is part of the company's ongoing efforts to improve shipping experience, which also includes launching guaranteed seven-day shipping earlier in 2016. Walker says the changes were necessary for the company's growth. For delivery, what I have seen and which has influenced the decision to make TryOuts is the fact that when you make discount, Walker explained. Free shipping over \$100 is something the customer expects all the time. If you spend a certain amount [with these stores], there is free shipping. In my opinion, customers are disappointed when they try to make a purchase and see that the economic impact of unlimited free shipping and returns to its customers would be justified by the additional business it would attract. You bear the cost of shipping by re-shopping, but this conversation doesn't fit well into an Excel spreadsheet, Walker added. It is not easy to determine the recurrence rate and forwarding rate. There was another key element of the puzzle delivery I learned from talking to Walker: If companies adjust the way free shipping works so that many companies sent or returned in the same box, it may be of economic benefit to the retailer. The benefit for us is for big shipping companies to put you in a cost structure based on your earnings. Walker says. The more packages you send, the cheaper it is to send a package. In our relationship with UPS, we send much more boxes and much heavier boxes. That's why we spend more money with them, but we get better prices because they're heavier. JackThreads benefits from something that every e-commerce company offers free shipping needs: Lope Capital. JackTweit shared \$54 million with Thrilleris last year before the two split into separate companies. The company also has a commercial company with T-Mobile and launched a shoe line this year. Will free shipping or resigning one way or another. Bob Schwartz, an e-commerce veteran, is best known as the former president of Magento and as the founder of Nordstrom.com, in the early days of online shopping. Schwartz took a darker view: That free shipping to customers is an unsustainable trend, fueled by giant companies like Amazon that aren't responsible for investors' profitability in a meaningful way. Amazon is pulling everyone into the ditch to play that [free shipping] game. Schwartz told me he saw free shipping as part of the historic arc in e-commerce. In the early years of online shopping in the late 1990s and early 2000s, venture capitalists funded free shipping. We spent risky money trying to get customers into a market that wasn't really quite ready for it, and educating customers that delivery should be free. This has continued to a sharp rise in online shopping over the past decade, with Amazon, which until now is a retailer. Amazon is pulling everyone into the ditch to play that [free shipping] game, Schwartz explained in a phone call. Amazon to me is an anchor that forces the industry to free shipping because Amazon has no responsibility to be profitable. That's up from all the other retailers in the same jug, but these other retailers are responsible for winning - even if they don't hold on to the same metrics that Amazon. I believe that a model that is similar here is instead of risky guys funding free shipping, Wall Street has a perception of Amazon's ability to create a retail crisis where they can pull other retailers. Other retailers are responsible for each guarter, but Amazon is not, part of the cost of shipping for both Prime members and non-members means huge costs. In October alone, Amazon opened five new fulfillment centers, finance director Brian Awawski said during the conversation about the company's Q3 revenue. By the end of 2016, he said, Amazon will have opened 26 new fulfillment centers, mostly in North America. By comparison, 14 were found in 2015. (According to Piper Jaffrey analysts, about 44 percent of the U.S. population now lives within 20 miles of the Amazon facility, up from about a guarter in 2014). This investment in shipping is a significant price for any company, even Amazon.Last year, packaging company Shorr published a detailed report on what it calls the Amazon Effect, a huge growth in shipping caused by the behavior of Amazon's ability to allow customers to buy small additional products at no extra delivery fees when ordering more expensive products. Although the items may be small, they add to a huge amount of transport materials, physical space, busy and gasoline and working hours spent bringing them from point A to point B.But Amazon pays a huge amount of money to sustain the Amazon effect: last year, the company spent \$11.5 billion on delivery while generating just \$6.5 billion according to the annual report and as recent earnings reports show., its costs are increasing. Although Amazon reports a staggeringly good 45% annual revenue growth rate from shipping, these figures will pose challenges for almost every other company. However, Amazon's huge size means the company is benefiting from economies of scale that most of its competitors (apart from Walmart and Target) don't: Amazon has the profits from Amazon Web Services, as well as a huge amount of global online shopping deals that help address it. And the wealth of data the company has on shopper preferences means it knows, perhaps better than any other retailer, how best to tailor ex amenities like free shipping. Big retailers like Amazon and Target also have another extraordinary benefit over other e-commerce retailers when it comes to delivery. Extremely close relationships with USPS and other shipping companies. While the average retailer will pay about \$7 to \$8 for ground delivery, the same delivery could cost Amazon about \$4 to \$5, according to Barclays. And estimates, as its transportation costs soar, Amazon has sought new advantages by starting to build its own delivery infrastructure, with fleets of cargo planes, tractor-trailers, and, one day, drones. Though it would be unfair to accuse Amazon or Walmart or Target of pushing retailers into a free-shipping competition. Thousands of retailers are already offering it in one form or another. As a result, customers have come to expect free shipping, regardless of how it is built into the otherwise, and this affects the types of e-commerce businesses that may succeed in the future. Free shipping is built in part on companies' high expectations, such as relatively low fuel prices and an ever-growing appetite for online shopping that can fuel almost eternal growth. But if there is a sharp rise in fuel prices or another recession in the near future, e-commerce companies may find themselves in a very uncomfortable place. The future of free deliverySchwartz, like Storch, imagines that alternative models will emerge, such as taking online orders in stores, or using out-of-place drop-down boxes. Schwartz says he likes the idea of loading shipping, but offers free returns to encourage customer goodwill. In September, Touch of Modern conducted A/B tests for free shipping, but offers free returns to encourage customer goodwill. In September, Touch of Modern conducted A/B tests for free shipping, but offers free returns to encourage customer goodwill. offering some customers if they spent a certain amount. We wanted to see what we were doing if we offered free shipping over a certain amount and make the margin, Hume said. However, he added, we quickly found trying to message it as free shipping did not work as a whole. If we message as free shipping and make a margin the same, it does not work. It's fairer to offer a fair price and be honest about what shipping [price] is. Honestly or not, it's a buyer's market for customers looking for goods that are cheaply shipped to their home or office these days. Large mega-retailers are able to keep up with the cost of free shipping as just another business expense; smaller e-commerce companies may have to go into debt to compete with the big boys. Other companies may simply choose to raise the price of their products, and then offer free shipping instead. As Touch of Modern's experience shows, it's quite possible for online retailers to avoid charging for shipping in 2016. But they and other companies that choose not to deliver for free face a challenge: convincing customers that pre-charging for shipping is actually cheaper. Related video: How retail giant Amazon got a start and how it still delivers today

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