Collision Course?

The intersection of technology, parking, and freight can be a messy one. But it doesn’t have to be and everybody can win.

By Richard B. Easley, CAPP
Technology for Parking is Changing Things for the Better—but technology isn’t only making parking better; it’s creating a sea change in consumerism worldwide. I’ll tell you a story that may not seem like it’s connected to parking, but if we open our eyes, we’ll see that it not only greatly affects our industry, but makes our strides in technology almost irrelevant for a major issue we’re facing.

Let’s start with some facts about only one of many companies and initiatives emerging all around us. Most of us have heard of Amazon.com and Amazon Prime. Amazon has grown with its click, click, click, ding-dong-delivery-to-your-door service by leaps and bounds. Revenue growth has been astounding, and Amazon Prime membership has exploded in just the past five years.

What, you may ask, does this have to do with parking? Let’s dig a little deeper. There are now close to 80 million Amazon Prime members who are eligible for same-day delivery of their goods—for free! How many of us have made purchases (Amazon or otherwise) over the internet and had our goods delivered to just about any address we desired? Yes, most of us. When we look up and outside of our parking domain, we can begin to see companies (DHL and Audi) offering services that allow goods to be delivered directly to the trunk of our car, whether it’s in a surface lot, in a parking garage, at a parked curbside, or even in a driveway. Still other technologies are facilitating delivery of goods and services not only directly to your home address but also placing them directly inside your home when delivered—not left on your porch, but inside your home, utilizing technologies that allow the delivery company to use a code to unlock your front door or to open your garage and leave your parcel safely in your home, apartment, or garage.

Faster Service
To make technology matters and freight even more interesting, we are starting to see a surge in online purchase deliveries guaranteed in just one hour or less. If you think about delivering goods in one hour or less and how long it takes to get home from work during rush hour, you know there’s no way to make 30 or more deliveries in less than one hour with one vehicle from a warehouse located outside of town. Thinking deeper, you will come to realize that to make such a guarantee, a company would have to use many smaller vehicles and also create a network of mini-distribution centers throughout an urban area. To be delivered in one hour means an item would have to come from a location fairly close by.

In addition to the rapid rise in freight deliveries on our already congested, parking-constrained streets, food delivery is becoming more prevalent. Amazon has purchased Whole Foods Markets with the realization that consumers can get the freshest, healthiest foods and have them delivered to the consumer’s doorstep via the Amazon delivery system. Business enterprises such as UberEats, GrubHub, DoorDash, etc., are rapidly responding to consumer desires to have restaurant food delivered quickly and inexpensively. These companies are strategically placing themselves in relationships that will allow for rapid growth, quick delivery, and loyal customers.
And Parking
What does this have to do with parking, and why should I be concerned or care?

The technology advancements that allow all of us to get our big-screen TV or our printer cartridges or that new Fitbit watch the same day (or, heaven forbid, we have to wait two days) with just a few clicks does not happen without parking. Each and every delivery vehicle has to park. Maybe for a period of 90 seconds or maybe for five minutes but almost always right at the location of delivery (or pickup)—and not at the open space two blocks away or the garage around the block. The next time you go outside, take a look and you’ll be surprised at how many delivery vehicles you suddenly notice all around you. Listen and look for the offers for free delivery. It doesn’t matter if it’s a new computer or some milk and eggs from the grocery store or that delicious order of chicken piccata from the Italian restaurant on 23rd Street, they are all responding to our demands and will find or make a parking space to ensure our deliveries are on time.

Let me ask those of you who think our parking technologies are solving all of our problems: Do our technology innovations address the freight delivery challenges that require vehicles to stop and park in front of the building where the lady in Apt. 15C is waiting for her piping hot dish of chicken lo mein? Do they help the delivery vehicle that has six minutes left before the one-hour delivery guarantee is exceeded? (That would be the new projector lamp Mr. Johnson in office suite 3F paid extra for to make sure the visiting clients in his 2 p.m. meeting will be able to see his latest presentation.) Unfortunately, that parking reservation app or cell phone parking payment system app or the online mapping of empty and full parking spaces in the six-level garage or the license plate reading gate access system will not provide any relief for these types of freight deliveries.

Today, those highly innovative technologies we are deploying in the parking industry do amazing things, but they do little to nothing for the delivery vehicles that are crowding and blocking lanes because we (you and I) are ordering our goods online without regard to how they get delivered, where the delivery vehicles have to park, or what congestion issues are caused. We are mostly concerned that the delivery is made when we want it, where we want it, and it had better not be late. Meeting these challenges takes a large toll on the freight delivery systems that are evolving to accommodate consumer demands. Unfortunately, we all pay for that with dangerous parking scenarios (blocking roadway lanes, blocking bicycle lanes, blocking sidewalk/pedestrian access, etc.), all while the troublesome congestion problems increase.

Delivery Vehicles and Drivers Look Nothing Like They Used To
Our perceptions of what the delivery person and delivery vehicles look like are probably outdated. The delivery person delivers groceries as well as goods from Target and Walmart and other stores from which people purchase online and expect their deliveries within two hours. Naomi, the nice delivery woman, pulled up to our home and I had no idea that she was delivering the food contributions we ordered for a church function from the Wegmans grocery store. She works only in the evenings on a part-time basis for extra money because she dislikes the daytime congestion and lack of parking space availability of working regular hours, but many of her peers work during the day.

The types of vehicles shown in the collage on page 35 are only a small sample of delivery vehicles that are making all types of deliveries from dining room tables to sushi and everything in between.

Many cities provide loading zone spaces, but they are inadequate for the types of deliveries that are on the rise. Unfortunately, even if there was a dedicated loading zone at each and every location (which there isn’t), too often the spaces are taken by automobiles that are not making deliveries—or there is another delivery vehicle in the spot already. Many years ago in the early ’90s, a senior executive from UPS confided to me...
that in one city alone, UPS pays more than $1 million in citation fees. He said that due to lack of parking availability, the company must consider those fees a cost of doing business.

Today, there is much more freight delivery traffic with little to no increase in parking spaces/loading zones. Because of my work in transportation technology, I became keenly aware of the problem facing delivery companies and the costs associated with citations and towed vehicle recoveries. There are solutions! But they aren’t easy.

In addition to increased demand for goods delivery, there has been an increase in demand for bicycle lanes as well as dedicated transit lanes. These demands are growing while the increasing and unmet demands for space to make goods delivery are decreasing. It’s a recipe for a collision that will have to be addressed. There’s a thought that in order to come up with good answers, you must first ask good questions. The challenge facing freight delivery parking challenges must first be recognized and understood by those of us in the parking industry before we can begin to find innovative solutions that work and benefit our organizations, our customers, and the general public.

**Real Solutions Exist**

The issue of freight and parking availability is a complex one. The solutions involve many stakeholders. One would be hard pressed to find someone who likes to see freight delivery vehicles on their roadways and conversely, practically no one is willing to sacrifice or be denied the convenience of having their goods delivered to their home or place of employment. Bicycle lanes are important. Transit lanes are important. Unblocked sidewalks are important. Parking regulations are important. All of these stakeholders think that their freight deliveries are important.

The key to real solutions is starting with education and awareness. Yes, the parking industry and freight are connected. Look around—look at the UberEats or GrubHub advertisement at your favorite restaurants; look at the delivery options on your favorite online shopping website. If you look, you’ll see this issue all around you, and some of us may even wonder how we didn’t see it before. When that happens, we’ll have reached the first step in addressing this ever-worsening collision between freight and parking.

It is my hope that we continue, as an industry, to embrace technologies that make sense, that move us forward, that are cost feasible and improve lives. It is also important that we take our place in the broader transportation environment and recognize our role in solving some major challenges. We can do this!

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