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Cash for carry

By [Daphna Berman](#)

If you are traveling and are willing to take a web cam and some native crafts from the Philippines to Washington, D.C., there's someone in Manila who's happy to pay \$35 for your trouble. Or if you happen to be flying from New York to Jerusalem, you can earn an extra \$300, just by taking along a box of orthodontic supplies on your next vacation.

With the recently launched Web site, www.casualcourier.com, people looking to send a package can be matched with travelers looking to supplement their airfare - in a way that is startlingly similar to online dating. The service went online in November, just before the holiday season, and aims to become a budget alternative to mainstream delivery services like FedEx and DHL.

"Whenever I traveled, people were always asking me to take this or that for them," explained Jack Jacobs, a Jerusalem-based lawyer who launched The Casual Courier (TCC). "So I started to think about creating a more formal way for people to send packages with each other from one place to another."

To become a casual courier, travelers register through the site and list their general flight details, what they're willing to take along and how much they're expecting to earn. People looking to send something, meanwhile, register the size of their package, as well as what prices they're willing to offer.

If the search engine finds a match, the sender and courier get in touch, meet to exchange the package and negotiate a fair price, which is usually half what official delivery services are charging. The courier, according to TCC guidelines, should also examine the package in the presence of the sender and accept it only if he "feels comfortable."

"There is no obligation involved until you accept the package," U.S.-born Jacobs, 31, explained. And the site's \$1 connection fee is only collected once an agreement between the two parties is reached.

Since TCC was launched, the site has received considerable media coverage, including a front page article in the Boston Herald's business section. As a result, word of mouth has spread and there are users in countries including Australia, India, Chile, Pakistan and Indonesia. One potential courier even contacted Jacobs to complain that the U.S. territory of Guam wasn't listed on the site's country list.

TCC already has several hundred registered users, though Jacobs won't provide the number of successful deliveries - other than to say that "we are constantly growing." TCC also has an "air sitter" service, so that travelers with special needs can go online and hire someone to help them throughout their flight.

Amy Marion, from Tel Aviv, read about TCC on a local listserv and because she's a frequent traveler, decided to join. She flew last week to St. Louis, and on her way back to Israel, will stop in Boston, where she's planning to meet a fellow TCC user who wants to send a pile of magazines to Israel, in exchange for \$15 dollars.

"I figured that it would be a nice thing to do and you never know who you'll meet," she said in a telephone interview hours before her flight. "I'm definitely nervous and maybe the magazines have LSD in them; my imagination can go very far. But I'll use my intuition and if I don't feel comfortable, then I won't do it."

Marion isn't the only skeptic and some potential users may question the safety of such a service. But Jacobs pointed to online dating sites as a model. "Who ever believed that dating sites would be so popular, that two people who don't know each other would agree to meet in a dark bar somewhere in New York? People were very skeptical at the beginning and now look at how popular online dating is." Still, he has a legal disclaimer just in case.

"There is nothing inherently wrong with carrying a package for someone else as long as it's not dangerous or prohibited," he added. "Whenever I've traveled, airport security has asked me if I'm carrying something for someone else, and I said, for instance, yes, I'm carrying headphones for my neighbor. They had a look at it and said that it was okay. As long as you are open, honest and disclose clearly what you have, there is nothing wrong."

Before launching the site, TCC's legal counsel contacted airports and government offices to confirm the legality of service and "they all said that it was okay to take something for someone on an international airline as long as what they were transporting was safe," Jacobs said.

And indeed, an inquiry to the Israeli Airports Authority about the safety aspect of the service elicited the following response: "The Israeli Airports Authority's security personnel ask every passenger who is traveling abroad if he received any sort of package for transport and accordingly, check those packages. This is done to make sure that a person is not being taken advantage of by unknowingly bringing something dangerous onto the flight. In any event, every passenger that goes through Ben-Gurion International Airport is subjected to a security check."

Added Jacobs: "There were 12 billion packages sent worldwide last

year and with hundreds of millions of travelers, it makes for an interesting combination. I really believe that the concept is needed, and I'm certain that the market is ready for it."

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