couri

WHITE PAPER

THE HIDDEN COST OF UNRELIABLE LAST-MILE DELIVERY

What delivery failures actually cost UK food and catering businesses, and what a genuinely reliable delivery partner needs to get right.

couri.co.uk



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

For UK food and catering businesses, delivery has quietly become part of the product itself.

When an order arrives late, damaged, incomplete, or in poor condition, customers rarely separate the delivery company from the business they ordered from. They blame the restaurant, caterer, bakery, or brand whose name was on the order.

The visible cost of a delivery failure might be a refund or replacement order. The real cost is often much larger: staff time spent resolving the problem, customers who quietly choose a competitor next time, negative reviews that influence future customers, and growth that remains limited because delivery cannot be trusted to scale.

This white paper examines the hidden cost of delivery failure, why food and catering present particular challenges, and what a reliable delivery operation needs to get right. It also looks at how Couri approaches those challenges through scheduled routes, on-demand delivery, catering-specific service, real-time visibility, and a delivery network designed around the needs of businesses.



DELIVERY IS NOW PART OF THE PRODUCT

Online food ordering has moved from novelty to a normal part of how consumers buy food.

As more revenue depends on an order successfully reaching someone's home, workplace, or event, the last mile is no longer simply a back-office logistics function. It is part of the customer experience.

That distinction matters.

A restaurant can prepare an excellent meal, a caterer can execute a flawless event, and a bakery can produce an order exactly as requested. If the delivery arrives late or in poor condition, much of that work can be undone in the final few miles.

The customer doesn't experience the kitchen and the courier as separate businesses. They experience one brand.



THE SCALE OF THE PROBLEM

Delivery failure is a bigger and more expensive problem than many operators budget for.

Food delivery has no industry-wide measure of what failed deliveries cost, but the wider UK e-commerce market gives a useful benchmark. IMRG's most recent Valuing Home Delivery Review (2021) estimated that failed and late online parcel deliveries cost UK retailers, carriers and consumers around £5.7 billion a year. Retailers bore roughly £4.6 billion of that, much of it from customers who didn't return after a poor delivery experience. The same review put first-attempt failures at around 4% of deliveries and late deliveries at nearly 10% before the pandemic, with performance worsening under peak pressure. For food businesses the stakes are higher still: a parcel can be redelivered tomorrow, but a late catering order or a cold meal can't.

Source: IMRG, Valuing Home Delivery Review 2021.

These figures come primarily from general UK retail and parcel-delivery research. They establish the scale of the wider delivery problem, but food and catering introduce additional risks that parcel delivery does not.

£1.6bn

Estimated annual cost of failed deliveries to UK retailers

8–15%

Frequently cited range for first-attempt delivery failures in general UK delivery research

50%

Of surveyed consumers reported experiencing a late food delivery

Sources and methodologies vary. The first two figures relate to general UK delivery research; the 50% figure comes from food-delivery research.



couri

WHY FOOD IS A HARDER PROBLEM THAN A PARCEL

A LATE PARCEL IS INCONVENIENT

LATE FOOD CAN BE UNUSABLE

There is no meaningful way to redeliver a cold catering order for a lunch meeting that has already happened. A delivery booked for 12:30 that arrives at 1:15 has not simply been delayed. It has failed a commitment the caterer made to its own customer.

Food also has practical constraints that ordinary parcels do not. Temperature, presentation, handling, timing, order accuracy, and the condition of the food on arrival all affect the customer's experience.

Research from Chatmeter, based on analysis of more than two million restaurant reviews and a survey of 1,533 consumers, found that **50%** of consumers had experienced a late food delivery and **50%** had received food that arrived cold. Another **44%** reported missing items from their order.



The consequences extend beyond the individual order. Chatmeter found that half of consumers said a poor delivery experience would stop them from ordering from that restaurant again.

That makes the delivery experience a retention issue, not simply a logistics issue.



THE FIVE HIDDEN COSTS

01 Direct Cost: Refunds and Comped Orders

The most visible cost is usually the easiest to calculate.

A refund. A replacement order. A discount. Perhaps the cost of sending another driver.

These costs matter, but they are often only the beginning.

02 Staff Time

Someone has to deal with the failure.

A manager may need to find out where the driver is, contact the customer, arrange a replacement, process a refund, rebook the delivery, or explain what happened to an important catering client.

None of that work generates additional revenue.

It pulls people away from service, operations, menu development, sales, and growth.

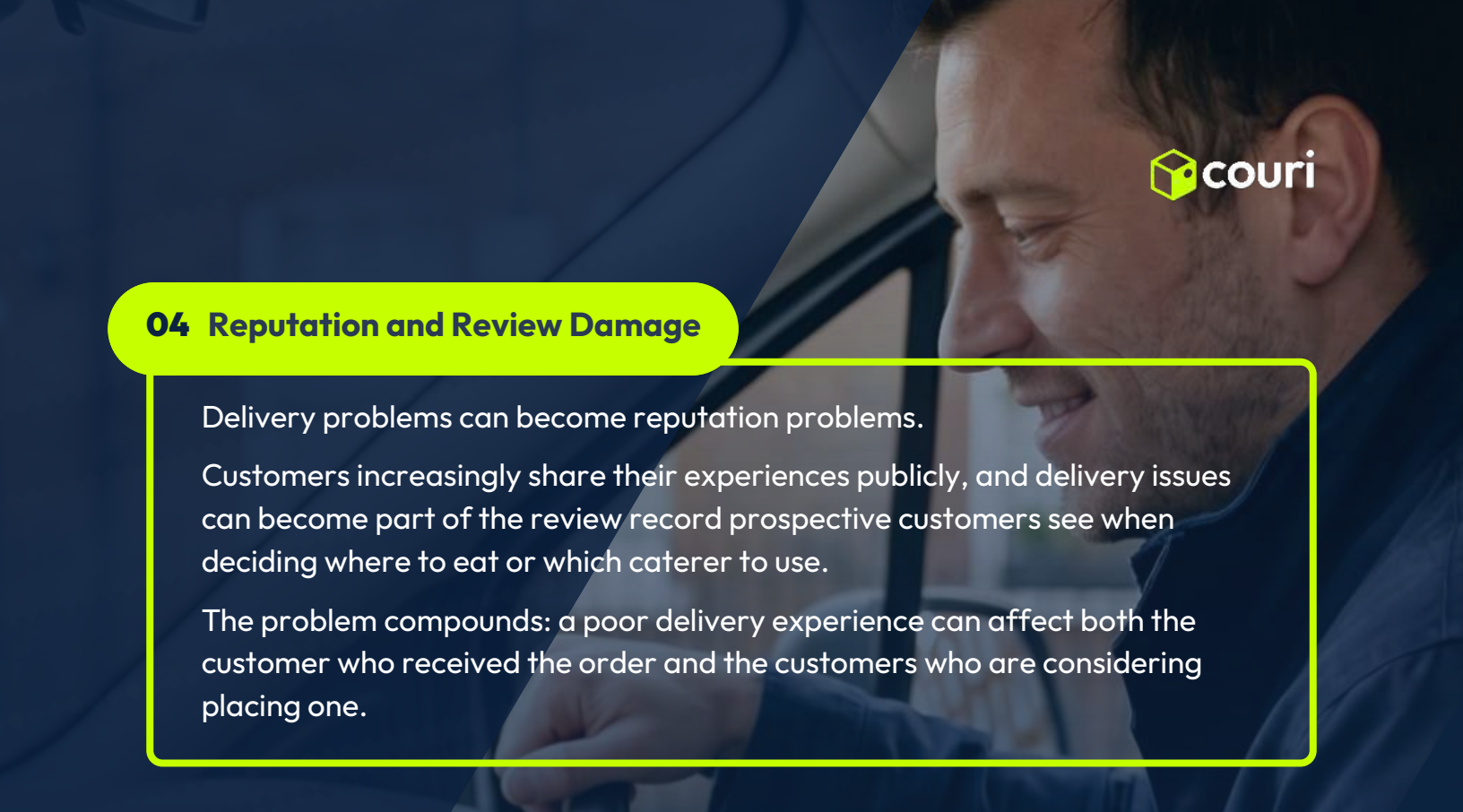
03 Lost Repeat Business

The most expensive customer may be the one who never complains.

They simply don't order again.

A customer who has one bad delivery experience may give the business another chance. Some will not. And unlike a refund, lost future revenue rarely appears as a clearly identifiable cost on a financial statement.

This makes customer retention one of the most difficult hidden costs of unreliable delivery to measure.



04 Reputation and Review Damage

Delivery problems can become reputation problems.

Customers increasingly share their experiences publicly, and delivery issues can become part of the review record prospective customers see when deciding where to eat or which caterer to use.

The problem compounds: a poor delivery experience can affect both the customer who received the order and the customers who are considering placing one.

05 Capped Growth

Perhaps the most overlooked cost is the growth a business never pursues because it cannot confidently fulfil the demand.

A caterer may be capable of taking on more corporate orders but lack the delivery capacity to handle several simultaneous drop-offs.

A bakery may have demand for recurring wholesale or office deliveries but not have the drivers to support additional routes.

A restaurant may have opportunities beyond its immediate delivery radius but lack the operational infrastructure to serve them consistently.

In each case, delivery becomes the ceiling.

Growth is limited not by demand, but by confidence in fulfilment.

couri

WHAT RELIABLE DELIVERY ACTUALLY REQUIRES FOR FOOD

Given how unforgiving food can be to delays and mishandling, a genuinely reliable delivery partner needs to get several things right at once.

Food-aware handling

Drivers need to understand that food is not simply another package. Catering trays, prepared meals, bakery products, and other food orders require appropriate handling throughout the journey.

Scheduled and on-demand capability

Food businesses rarely operate in only one mode. They may need recurring routes every week, while also needing an urgent delivery when an unexpected order comes in. A reliable partner needs to support both.

Real-time visibility

A delivery shouldn't disappear into a black box after it leaves the kitchen. Real-time tracking allows businesses to see what is happening and address issues before they become customer-facing failures.

Multi-drop capability

Catering businesses often need multiple orders delivered from one kitchen within a narrow window.

That requires more than simply finding a driver. It requires planning, routing, communication, and execution.

Defined delivery windows

For catering and corporate food orders, "sometime around lunch" is not a service level. The delivery window needs to reflect the commitment made to the customer.





COURI IN PRACTICE

Couri's approach is built around these realities.

Its delivery services include on-demand delivery for urgent orders, scheduled routes for recurring and multi-drop requirements, and restaurant and catering delivery designed around corporate food orders and catering trays. Couri also provides real-time tracking, dispatch tools, and operational support.

But the value of that model is easiest to understand when you look at what it means in practice.

CASE STUDY

Recurring Bakery Routes

A bakery's delivery operation can be deceptively complex.

Orders need to leave on schedule, multiple stops may need to be completed within a defined window, and the products themselves require careful handling. A missed or significantly delayed stop doesn't just create a logistics problem. It can disrupt the bakery's relationship with the business or customer waiting for the order.

Couri supports recurring bakery delivery routes, giving the business a delivery operation it can plan around rather than rebuilding its driver capacity for every route.

Poilâne's London bakery has worked with Couri (formerly Vanuse) for more than five years. Couri runs two scheduled routes a day, five days a week, with around 25 drops per route. That's roughly 250 deliveries a week across London.

"We found it really difficult to find a good, reliable delivery service, until we found Vanuse (Couri). They are the best delivery partner we have ever had. Our requirements are complex and Vanuse (Couri) handle it all without issue. We have been with them for over 5 years now."

— Poilâne, London

The important point is not simply that Couri provides drivers.
It provides a repeatable delivery operation that can support the bakery as its delivery needs change.



CASE STUDY

Scheduled and On-Demand Catering

Catering creates a different delivery challenge.

The delivery may be one-off rather than recurring, but the timing can be even more critical. A corporate lunch, event, or large catering order has a fixed purpose and a fixed window. If the food arrives late, the customer cannot simply move the event.

Couri supports on-demand catering delivery through Nash, providing delivery capacity when a scheduled route is not the right solution.

This gives the catering operation flexibility without requiring it to maintain a full internal delivery operation for every possible demand scenario.

Couri fulfils catering orders through Nash for corporate and event clients. Most orders are booked one to three days in advance, and Couri also takes same-day orders when demand comes in at short notice.

These are usually larger orders that won't fit on a standard bike or moped. Couri assigns e-cargo bikes with 1–2 m^3 of load capacity, ridden by couriers experienced in catering delivery, and commits to a ±15-minute delivery window.

Together, these two examples demonstrate two sides of the same problem: reliable delivery needs to work both when demand is predictable and when it isn't.



RELIABILITY IS AN OPERATING CAPABILITY

The real question for a food business isn't simply:

"CAN YOU DELIVER THIS ORDER?"

It is:

"CAN YOU DELIVER THIS ORDER RELIABLY, AT THE RIGHT TIME, IN THE RIGHT CONDITION, AND GIVE US VISIBILITY WHEN SOMETHING CHANGES?"

That is a fundamentally different requirement.

Couri's model combines on-demand delivery, scheduled routes, restaurant and catering delivery, large-item transport, real-time visibility, and operational support. The goal is to make delivery a dependable part of the operation rather than another variable the business has to manage.

For food businesses, that distinction matters.

Because when delivery works, customers experience the food. When delivery fails, they experience the failure.



CONCLUSION

For UK food and catering businesses, delivery reliability isn't a logistics detail sitting quietly in the background.

It is a customer experience issue, a retention issue, a reputation issue, and ultimately a growth issue.

The cost of an unreliable delivery partner is not limited to the occasional refund. It can show up in staff hours, lost repeat orders, negative reviews, strained customer relationships, and opportunities a business decides not to pursue because it cannot confidently fulfil them.

Reliable delivery requires more than a driver and a van. It requires the right people, the right processes, visibility throughout the journey, and the flexibility to handle both planned and unexpected demand.

For food businesses that are ready to make delivery a reliable part of the product they provide, Couri can help.

Talk to Couri about your delivery requirements or request a tailored delivery solution at

couri.co.uk

SOURCES

- Pegasus Couriers, Cost of Failed Deliveries Explained, 2025
- Carriyo, The State of eCommerce Delivery in the UK, 2026
- HubBox, What Failed Deliveries Cost Retailers, 2026
- IMRG, Valuing Home Delivery Review, referenced in UK delivery research
- Chatmeter, Poor Delivery Experiences Threaten Restaurant Reputations, 2025
- CCS McLays food-delivery research, reported by UK food-industry publications
- Couri, service and company information, accessed 2026



couri

couri.co.uk