



# Rubber Bands And Inky Hands

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I was a paperboy. Those who've joined me in the fine art of folding, banding, and chucking know that this means in some ways I'm still a paperboy. It's not a job you can leave behind; much like the policeman still reliving his last case, a former paperboy can always see the ink on his fingers. I gave up the gig nine years ago. Since then I've gone to college, received my master's degree and worked in a host of non-delivery jobs, and I still have former customers who introduce me as their paperboy.

Not that I mind. There's something noble about being a paperboy. The title itself belongs to another era, combining the innocence of an Eagle Scout with the hustling self-respect of the newsie. The traditional paperboy is endangered now, caught between economies of scale that favor larger routes and the newspaper industry's abandonment of afternoon editions. (My hometown paper, the South Bend Tribune, didn't have to be delivered until 5 p.m. on weekdays.)

Instead of the apple-cheeked inkslinger of yore, today's newspaper deliverer is typically middle-aged with a car; too ragged to get a real job, but still under the DUI threshold for getting his license revoked. Often he lives and works from home, by which I mean to say he sleeps in his station wagon.

Unlike today's newspaper deliverer, I never drove my route—instead, I did it the old-fashioned way: with roller blades. True, the bicycle is more traditional (Nintendo, 1989), but the few times I tried to do my route on bike I either got my bag caught in the chain or had to stop at every house to retrieve the paper from the bushes I'd tossed it in.

My last attempt on two wheels tried to avoid these problems by riding up to each house to drop the paper on the porch. This ended at the second house after I decided to daredevil it down the stairs. My back tire bucked higher after every step, finally flipping 180 degrees and depositing me on the sidewalks. Luckily, the newspapers took the brunt of it, but my bicycling days were over.

So it was roller blades from then on out. I would skate my way from house to house, staccato stepping my way up stairs and dancing back down (much safer than hurtling down on your bike). My scrawny neck wasn't the primary beneficiary of my shift to roller blades, though—that honor went to my wallet, as the tips started coming in like never before.

Unwittingly, I had become the proud proprietor of a shtick. I was the paperboy on roller blades! The neighborhood had never seen anything like it. And like anyone caught riding the crest of the moment's trend—five years later it would have been *eaperboy.com*—I cashed out for all I was worth.

Let's delve into paperboy economics for a moment. At the time, a month's subscription to the South Bend Tribune was \$10. Some people sent their money directly to the paper; for the rest I received a bill that I had to pay using a percentage of the moneys I collected from them. Throw in the fact that there are adults who have no problem hiding in their houses for months at a time, sitting silently in back rooms when the doorbell rings to avoid paying a thirteen-year-old the \$10 that will come out of his pocket, and my profit margin was slim.

I earned \$50–\$80 a month, enough for me to blow all my money on comic books and baseball cards, but not enough for me to blow all my money on comic books, baseball cards and fantasy role-playing guides (“Oh my God—they added spelunking as a skill!”). For that, tips were needed.

Now if my paperboy career could have been summed up on a trading card (and I would have eagerly bought such a thing and tracked it in a Beckett guide every month for increases in value), it would have been weak on paper. I was never the best at delivering on time—the “morning edition” on weekends was largely theoretical—and my window-breaking record had a couple blemishes.

Sure, I was conscientious about placing the paper where people wanted it—behind the screen door, between the second and third pillar on the porch, on the roof (oh, not on the roof? Oops!). That was a necessity, though, and also the toughest part about training a sub for the weekend...if you're an hour late every now and then (i.e., Sunday), people will forgive you, but if the paper's not where they're looking for it, they get pissed. As a result, the list I made for my fill-ins resembled a cheat sheet for a high-end escort service—not only did you have to know who to give it to, but also where and how.

Still, where I really shone was in what we paperboys like to call intangibles. Here are some examples for any service personnel looking to maximize revenue:

1. Be a smoking hot woman (if this is the case, you don't need to read any of the other tips).
2. Wear roller blades (sure, I filled this niche in the South Bend paperboy economy, but nothing says you can't be the roller-blading server or the gliding gas attendant).
3. Be invariably cheerful (but not phonily so).
4. Master the fine line between indicating that, while you'd *appreciate* a tip, you certainly don't *expect* one. How do you do

that? Smile, play dumb, and thank them like you've never received an extra cent before.

In the end, I worked the same route for five years, and I met some of the nicest people in town doing it (except for the few who stiffed me—you know who you are). These were families who asked how I was doing in school, told me about their latest vacation, and left a card with a little extra spending money in it for me at Christmas.

When I finally gave up the gig at seventeen to pursue opportunities in the high-finance world of dish and flatware rehabilitation, I was sorry to say goodbye, and they were sorry to see me go. Since then I've seen them at weddings, graduation parties, and in the op/ed pages of the very newspaper I delivered; I think of many of them to this day. After all, I was a paperboy once, and as many of my customers would tell you, part of me still is.