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The last mile in South Africa: how a premium parcel really reaches its customer

South African e-commerce is growing at close to 40% a year, and the delivery network has expanded to match. Yet the final few kilometres remain the stage where a premium brand is most often judged, and where it can most easily lose a customer.

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A market that now runs on parcels

Online retail in South Africa reached R96 billion in 2024, up 35%, and was on course to exceed R130 billion in 2025, close to one rand in ten spent at retail [1]. Couriers now deliver around three million online purchases to consumers every month [2]. The leading retailers have set the benchmark: Checkers Sixty60, which promises delivery within the hour, generated almost R19 billion in sales in the first half of 2025, up 47% [1].

The infrastructure has followed. The Courier Guy operates more than 2,300 smart lockers and 220 staffed kiosks under the former Pudo network; Pargo counts over 4,000 pick-up points in partner stores; PEP's Paxi service runs from more than 5,000 counters [3][4]. Banks have joined in, with Nedbank installing parcel lockers at over a hundred branches, and Aramex and DSV run their own locker networks [4]. A two-kilogram parcel can now cross the country from locker to locker for R49 [3].

What South African shoppers actually expect

Network density does not mean that customers have changed their habits. In DHL's 2025 survey of South African online shoppers, 86% preferred home delivery when asked what should happen if they were out; only 7% chose a parcel shop and 6% a locker [5]. The same shoppers are unforgiving: 80% abandon their basket if their preferred delivery option is missing, and 86% will not buy from a retailer whose delivery and returns partner they do not trust [6].

Returns weigh as heavily as deliveries. Eight shoppers in ten abandon a purchase when the return options fall short, and collection from home is the preferred method [5]. For a foreign

brand, one figure stands out: 53% of South African shoppers have abandoned a basket because of unexpected customs charges [5]. A price that does not include duties is, in practice, a lost sale.

Delivery option	Network and indicative price	Fit for premium goods
Door-to-door courier	National coverage; locker-to-door from R73 (2 kg), 1–4 business days [3]	Preferred by customers; requires insurance, signature and tracking
Smart lockers	2,300+ lockers; R49 to R119 locker-to-locker [3]	Secure and cheap, but chosen by only 6% of shoppers [5]
Staffed pick-up points	Pargo 4,000+ points, R75–R140; Paxi 5,000+ counters, from R59.95 [3][4]	Wide reach, slower (up to 9 days for Paxi); suited to returns
South African Post Office	In business rescue; funding for its recovery plan withdrawn [7]	Not suited to valuable parcels

Prices as published in August 2026 [3]. Customer preferences from DHL's 2025 South Africa e-commerce report [5].

Where the difficulty lies

Delivering in South Africa costs more than elsewhere. Industry estimates put last-mile costs 50% to 100% above the global average, driven by security, fuel and road conditions [2]. Crime is part of the equation: between 20 and 25 delivery vehicles are hijacked every day, and vehicle crime peaks in November and December, precisely the Black Friday and Christmas season when volumes are highest [2].

The regulatory landscape is also in motion. The Post Office has been in business rescue for several years, and in December 2025 its rescue practitioners were told that the second R3.8 billion funding tranche would not be provided. The same month, the minister of communications moved to end the Post Office's exclusive right to parcels under one kilogram, a change that still awaits ratification by the regulator [7].

For a premium parcel, these constraints add up to a set of non-negotiable choices: a carrier selected for the value and the destination, not only for the price; insurance and proof of delivery; discreet packaging; delivery slots that suit secure residential estates; proactive tracking messages; and a returns process that collects from the customer's door. Each of these choices must be negotiated, priced and monitored, and each failure is borne by the brand, not by the courier.

The cross-border trap

A European brand that ships directly from its own warehouse adds a further layer. The parcel arrives in South Africa as an individual import, cleared on its own, with duties calculated on the retail price and often collected from the customer at the door. It is precisely the scenario that more than half of South African shoppers say makes them abandon a purchase [5]. Avoiding it takes local presence, reliable partners and proven processes, none of which a brand can improvise from abroad.

THE FIRST EDIT AFRICA APPROACH

For EDIT14, its curated platform, First Edit Africa has developed a delivery model designed for premium goods and for South African realities, and makes it available to the brands it introduces. What matters to a brand is the result: its products reach South African customers in perfect condition and within the expected time, without surprises on delivery, with every order followed to its conclusion and after-sales handled locally. The brand enters South African e-commerce without negotiating with clearing agents, couriers or insurers, and without exposing its name to the risks of the last mile.

Sources

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