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THE BETA SHIPPING MANUAL

How to Establish Effective Shipping and Logistics Procedures for Your Next Beta Test



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INTRODUCTION

To run a successful hardware beta test, you need an effective shipping and logistics strategy. When managing a beta test, it's critical that your testers get the devices in a timely fashion and with everything they need to get started. Otherwise, you risk costly delays and difficulties retrieving your units.

This whitepaper outlines everything you need to know to effectively manage inventory, ship units, and handle returns for your test. By implementing these best practices, you'll be well on your way to running a successful hardware beta test.



IS THIS RESOURCE FOR YOU?

*This whitepaper is intended for individuals running private (also known as closed) beta tests for **hardware technology products** within or from the United States. This typically includes beta managers, product managers, quality managers, and others tasked with executing a beta test in preparation for their hardware product launch. For more resources, visit the Centercode resource library.*

INFRASTRUCTURE

Before you can hope to ship your first hardware unit to a tester, you're going to need to set up the means of doing so. Shipping your beta units is not as simple as dropping them in the nearest mailbox. It takes the right tools and well-thought-out procedures to effectively organize inventory, package and ship units, and manage returns at the end of your test.

The first step is to gather the appropriate supplies. Here are some basic things you will need to get started.

Initial Supplies:

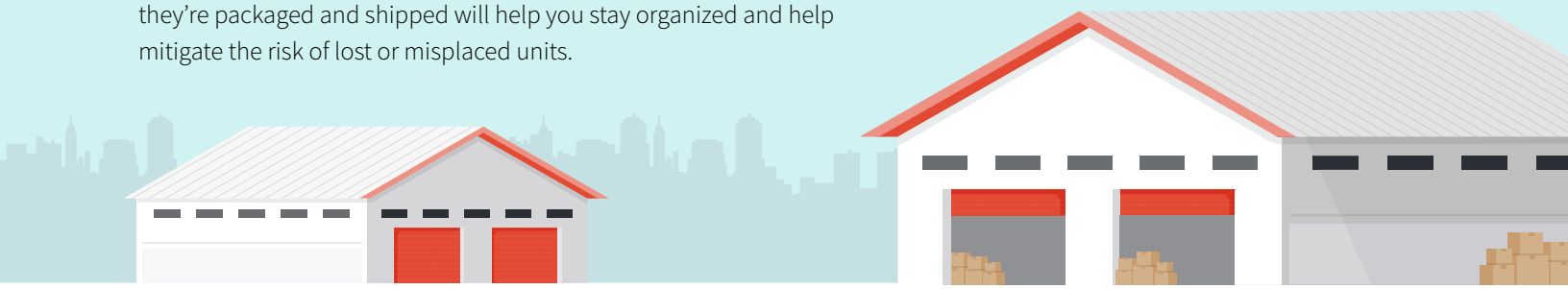
- **A secure space** - for storing your initial inventory.
- **A computer** - for cataloging and managing your inventory.
- **A FedEx, UPS, or USPS account** - for scheduling shipping.
- **A barcode scanner** - for keeping track of your devices. (optional)
- **A folding machine** - for preparing documentation. (optional)
- **A scale** - for weighing your beta units and shipping boxes.
- **A measuring tape** - for measuring your units and boxes.
- **A printer** - for printing outgoing and return shipping labels.

Once you have your supplies, you will be ready to begin storing and managing your inventory.

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INVENTORY

Every successful beta shipment starts with an organized inventory. Being able to efficiently store, track, and sort all of your units before they're packaged and shipped will help you stay organized and help mitigate the risk of lost or misplaced units.





Choose the Right Space

The first decision you have to make will be choosing a static-free space to store your inventory and set up shop. You'll want enough space to set up multiple rows of shelving as well as packing tables. The room you pick should also be dry and consistently kept at a reasonable temperature. A damp or hot room can easily damage your hardware devices. Even if the room itself is not terribly warm, keep your inventory away from unblinded windows. Keep in mind that rooms with windows can get especially warm if your office isn't air conditioned on the weekend.

Define Security Procedures

It's also important to ensure the space you house your inventory in is secure. For the most part, a hardware beta unit is fairly easy to lose or misplace. Aside from the usual risks associated with the need for security, a common (yet often overlooked) security concern is company employees.

The closer you get to a product launch, the more interested company employees can get about your product. This can often lead to different departments (as well as individual employees) requesting beta units for both professional and personal use. If you don't have a strictly enforced tracking system in place, it's easy to lose units or deplete the required inventory for a beta. Making sure the room where you keep your inventory has a separate lock is a great way to add extra security and make sure other employees don't have unfettered access to units.

Stock Enough Inventory

Once you have a secure location for your inventory, the next consideration is how much inventory you need for your beta test. It's common for hardware beta units to break or malfunction (it's the nature of beta) — so you'll need a surplus of units. A good rule of thumb is to have a 20% surplus of units for your beta test. So if you're running a 50-person beta test, you should have 10 extra units for your test, for a total of 60 units. These extra beta units may be used by alternate testers, to replace beta units that break in the field, and by your own team to reproduce bugs during the beta phase.

Create a Management System

Now that you have the right amount of inventory stored in a secure location, the easiest way to keep your inventory organized is by using the serial number on each beta unit. You can either enter each unit's serial number into an Excel spreadsheet or use a barcode scanner. Either method will allow you to assign the beta unit to the specific tester that receives it, which will be valuable for tracking your units throughout your beta test.

For example, if a beta unit experiences a critical failure, the serial number can help you keep track of that failed device. You can then give the failed unit (along with the bug report from the tester) to your QA team for testing after it's returned. Also, if someone were to leak your beta device to the press, you could identify that leaked device (and the person associated with it) using the serial number.

Mark Your Beta Units

It's also a good idea to label each of your hardware devices as a beta unit. Doing so reminds the tester the device they have is not market ready. In the event of a leak, a mark like this will also make it clear to the public that the beta unit isn't the final version. To learn more about how to prevent and manage beta leaks, check out our eBook on **Keeping Beta Tests Confidential.**

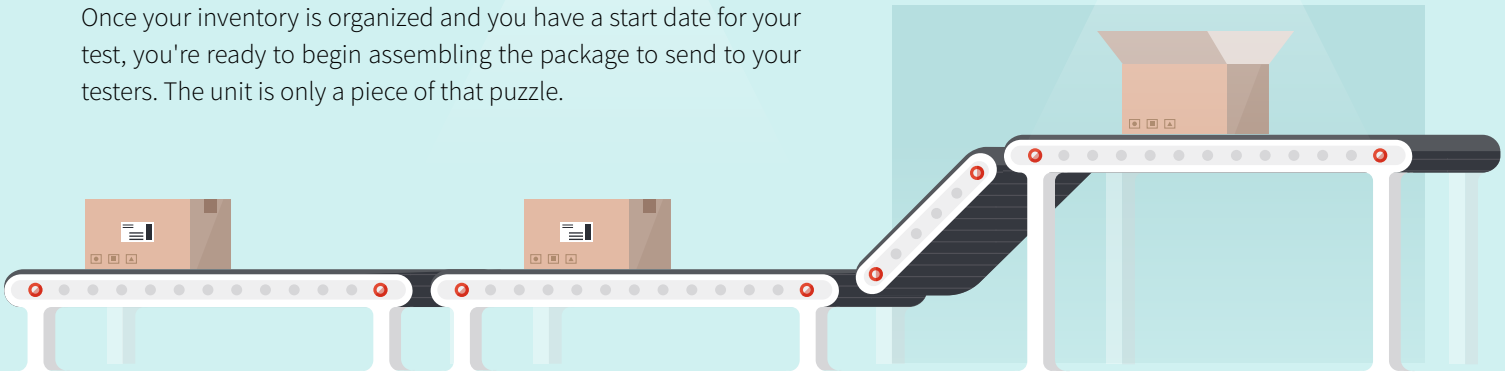
Labeling Your Beta Units

Labeling your units as beta versions of your product can be as blatant as putting "Beta Device: Not for Resale" directly on the unit. You can also go for more subtle markings that might not be noticeable to the testers, but would be identifiable to your team if pictures of a beta unit leaked.



PACKAGING

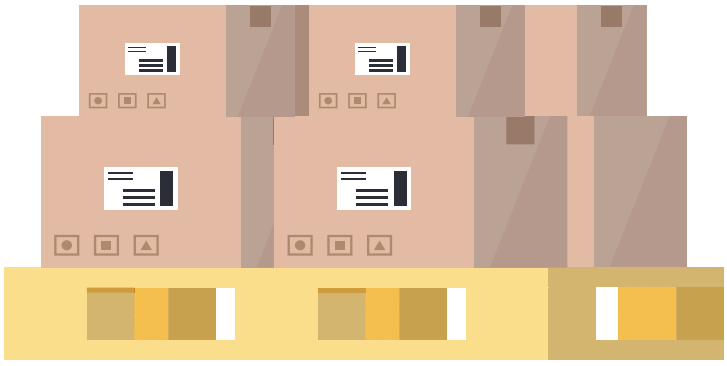
Once your inventory is organized and you have a start date for your test, you're ready to begin assembling the package to send to your testers. The unit is only a piece of that puzzle.



The unboxing experience is your testers' first experience with your product and will set the tone for the rest of the test. Make sure the unboxing experience isn't confusing and that your package includes everything your tester will need to get started. If possible, use the retail packaging for the final product so you can emulate the true customer experience as much as possible.

Your Packages Should Include:

- The shipping label
- The right sized box
- The beta device
- Any required accessory pieces (chargers, adapters, batteries, etc.)
- Packing peanuts
- A welcome letter
- A legal reminder
- A return shipping label and envelope



Define a Boxing Procedure

The first step to boxing a beta unit is to determine the size of the shipping box. Before you choose, think about what your priorities are. If you're building a shipping process for a year-round beta program, buying cheaper "one size fits all" boxes in bulk could be the way to go. If you're running a single beta test or one that is time-sensitive, buying smaller quantities of boxes that are tailored to your specific beta unit can be a better option. Both have their advantages, but either way you'll need to take time to measure and weigh your beta unit. Some tests require multiple pieces of hardware. If this is the case, weigh and measure each hardware item separately. Consider the best way to pack the items into one box to maximize your shipping efficiency.

It's likely your beta unit won't fit perfectly into the box, so we recommend using **biodegradable packing peanuts** to fill the empty space. You don't need to stuff the box with peanuts, just provide an extra layer of cushion in the event the package gets tossed around during shipping. At the same time, if the unit arrives damaged you will lose valuable time retrieving that unit and sending the tester a new one, so it's worth making sure your units are protected.



Prepare a Welcome Letter

Every package you send to a beta tester should have two pieces of paper in it. The first is a one-page **welcome letter.** If your beta test isn't too large, take the time to personally sign the welcome letter. This adds a special touch your testers will appreciate. Your welcome letter is also the place to include any initial instructions that can help your testers begin using your beta device properly.

Your Welcome Letter Should Include:

- A general welcome and congratulations for being chosen to participate in your test
- A reminder about the **NDA** your testers signed and their obligation to full confidentiality
- Your expectations for how responsive testers should be during the test
- Your expectations of how testers should participate and submit feedback
- A reminder to collaborate with other testers
- A "thank you" for the time and effort your testers will be putting into your test



Prepare a Legal Reminder

The second piece of paper you should include in your package is a reminder outlining the legal obligations of your testers in plain English.

Your Legal Reminder Should Include:

- A reminder the hardware doesn't belong to your testers
- A list of each hardware piece included in the package
- A reminder that after the test is over testers must return the hardware device, along with all other contents of the package
- Instructions for using the provided return label and original shipping box to return the unit at the end of the test
- The best email address to contact for further questions



ALWAYS INCLUDE A RETURN LABEL

Even if you're planning on letting your testers keep their beta units after the test is over, you should always include a return shipping label and instructions in your initial package. This serves a few purposes. First, if your testers start off the test assuming they'll get to keep the unit, it could affect their participation. Instead, you want that to be a pleasant surprise at the end. Second, there is always the possibility that a tester will need to return their unit. If the tester finds a show-stopping bug during the beta test, you'll need them to return the unit. If you have lackluster, unresponsive, or even belligerent testers, you'll want them to return their units as well. This all becomes much easier if you start testers off with an easy way to return devices.

SHIPPING

Now that your beta unit is packaged properly, you are ready to ship it to your testers. There are three primary shipping services you can use to ship your hardware: UPS, FedEx, or USPS. Each service offers excellent shipping options, but one service can be better than the others depending on your situation.



Compare Shipping Services

There is a good chance your company already uses one of these three services to handle its general shipping needs. If it does, it's often easiest to use that existing service to ship your hardware units for your test. **Otherwise, here are the main options and what you should know about each:**

UPS

- UPS will always deliver on the day specified, not before.
- UPS allows you to make an "End of Day" printout, which means they scan only once before picking up all of your packages, which means less time waiting for the driver.
- UPS owns all of their own trucks, so even if you ship overseas, a UPS truck will deliver your package.

FedEx

- If your package arrives early, FedEx will deliver it early.
- FedEx will assign each package with its own barcode, regardless of how many packages you send at once.
- FedEx typically outsources their international service.

USPS

- If you're shipping a hardware device that weighs a pound or less, USPS can be significantly cheaper.
- USPS doesn't offer scheduled pickups at your location, which can be important if you're shipping large packages (or a lot of small ones) and don't have an easy way to transport them.

Choose a Shipping Option

Most beta tests have a target start and end date. How you choose to ship your beta units will determine if you meet that schedule. As a general rule, you want all your testers to start on the same day, so you'll want your beta unit to arrive the day before the test begins. While there are a number of different shipping options (one-day shipping, two-day shipping, and ground shipping), we recommend standard two-day shipping.

Why Two-Day Shipping is Ideal

- Even though one-day shipping may seem best, not all of your testers will be able to receive an overnight package. If your tester lives in a rural area, overnight shipping will often translate into two-day shipping. Save the money and start with two-day air shipping to begin with.
- While ground shipping is cheaper, it's incredibly hard to know when a package will get to your tester. Delivery windows of three to five days are not ideal if you have a lot of testers that are supposed to begin testing on the same day.
- When you check with your shipping service, you will notice that there are multiple two-day shipping options. There is generally no strategic advantage to shipping your beta unit earlier in the day as opposed to later. For that reason, two-day shipping standard (delivered before 8PM) is the most cost-effective option.

Plan for International Shipping

If your company is planning on selling your new device worldwide, you might need to beta test your product overseas. If you decide to test internationally, there are a few requirements for shipping internationally to keep in mind.

The first thing you'll have to do is identify the most efficient way to ship your beta units. Typically, you will have to individually ship each unit from the United States to your international testers. However, if your company has an international office, it can sometimes be cheaper and faster to send all your pre-packaged beta units to that location first. From there, your international team can send the packages to their final destination.



LEAVE TIME FOR CUSTOMS

Regardless of when your shipping carrier specified your package would be delivered to your tester, your package still has to go through customs in each country, as well as U.S. customs if it's being returned. It's not uncommon for shipments to get delayed, opened, or sent back because your paperwork was incomplete or what you declared did not perfectly match what was shipped. When you ship internationally, don't assume your packages will automatically arrive on time. Accept the fact that delays or hiccups are just a part of the customs process.

Meet International Shipping Requirements

Before you ship, review that country's specific customs rules and policies. Make any initial arrangements you will need in order to ensure that you don't lose your units or accrue any fines. **Here's a list of basic obligations you must meet to ship internationally:**

- **Homologation** - Before a company can sell their hardware product to the general public, the government requires that your product goes through a certification process to ensure it meets certain regulatory standards. Most countries have a homologation process of some kind for technology products. If you don't have in-country certification of your product and are worried about it getting through customs, it's usually enough to physically mark the devices as beta units and state in the shipping manifest that you are sending your product strictly for testing purposes.
- **Denied Persons List (DPL)** - The United States keeps a list of people who have been denied U.S. export privileges for a variety of reasons. Before you ship a beta unit overseas (especially a technologically advanced one) check to make sure your testers aren't on the **United States Denied Persons List.**
- **Federal Tax ID** - All packages shipped overseas require that you state your company's Federal Tax ID or Employer Identification Number (EIN).
- **Harmonized Tariff Code** - All international exports and imports are categorically classified using a Harmonized Tariff Code, with different taxes, tariffs, and duties applied to each. If you don't categorize your package, you could end up paying higher taxes than you were supposed to.
- **Delivery Duty Paid** - Always ship your packages Delivery Duty Paid. Otherwise, your testers will be liable to pay the (often expensive) duties and taxes.

REQUIRE A SIGNATURE UPON DELIVERY

Always require a signature upon delivery of your package. All beta-related material should be considered "sensitive material". By limiting unnecessary risk (like leaving a beta unit outside someone's door unattended), you are much more likely to keep your units secure and accounted for.



Keep Your Testers in the Loop

You need to make sure you're communicating with your testers every step of the way. Start by asking your testers to confirm their shipping address once they're accepted into the test. When you ask testers to confirm their address, also tell them that someone will have to sign for the package when it's delivered. This will give testers the opportunity to change their shipping address (i.e. to work instead of home) to ensure the package can be delivered. Also ask testers for a phone number in case your shipping carrier has to call them.

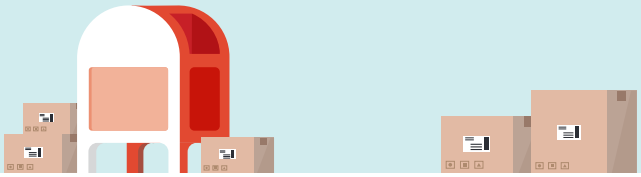
Once you know the date you plan to ship your beta units, it's important to let your testers know. Prepare testers by alerting them when the test will start, when they will receive their beta unit, and that a tracking number will arrive soon via email. Also, include the shipment method (two-day air shipping), the shipping carrier, and a reminder they will have to sign for the package.

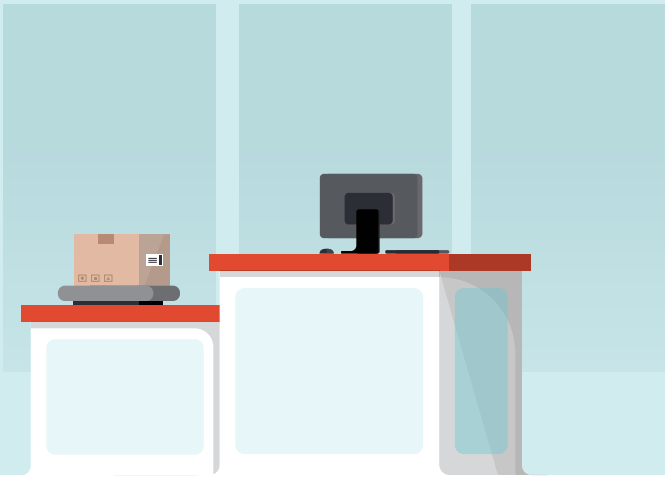
Once you've shipped your package, send testers an email with the package's tracking number so they can keep tabs on the package. After the package's scheduled delivery date and time, check with your shipping service (and the tester) to confirm it arrived. If, for some reason, the package wasn't delivered, send the tester a follow-up email with the new shipment details.

All major shipping services will make three delivery attempts. In the event that all three delivery attempts fail, your beta device will usually be shipped back to you (though sometimes this requires some follow-up on your part). If it does get shipped back, continue to communicate with your tester and reship your beta device back out as soon as possible. In the extremely rare case your beta unit is delivered but your tester claims they didn't receive it, fill out an incident report with your shipping carrier.

RETURNS

After your beta test has concluded, there are a few different ways you can handle returns. In many hardware beta tests, companies let their testers keep the devices they test. However, requiring testers to return their devices is not uncommon. It all depends on what will help you best meet your company's goals.





Reasons to Let Testers Keep Beta Devices:

- If your testers don't have to return your beta units, you don't have to pay for return shipping.
- If you let your testers keep the device, you can use it as a way to reward your testers for participating in your test.
- There's not much you can do with a beta unit after a test is over, so giving it to your testers might be the best use of your devices.

Reasons to Ask Testers to Ship Beta Devices Back:

- If you need the units to conduct a failure analysis.
- If there are major problems with the device during beta testing, then you won't want your testers using (and getting frustrated with) the product.
- If the device that was tested is not an accurate representation of your company's final product.
- If you need the units for additional beta phases with other users.
- If your product hasn't yet met safety or regulatory requirements.

If you do ask your testers to return their units, save money by choosing ground shipping for their return. There's little to gain from paying for two-day shipping when it's half the cost to get your units back a few days later.

When your testers ship their unit back to you, they might forget to return an accessory or cord. Don't sweat the small stuff. If your product includes some low-cost accessories, don't worry if they don't all come back. Just make sure you have a couple of extras on hand if you plan on running another beta phase.

Plan for International Returns

When shipping beta units internationally (due to certain custom and import restrictions), you will not be able to send a return label with your package like you can domestically. Instead, you must wait for the end of the test and individually email each tester a return label, which they can print out and use to ship the package back to you. This rule also includes shipping to Canada and Mexico.

Process Returned Units

Once your beta units have been returned to you, log them as returned. If you are using a scanner, rescan the beta device's tracking number. If you are keeping inventory using a spreadsheet, mark the unit as returned and note the date. You should also thank your beta testers for returning their units. With all the emphasis put on the importance of returning units quickly, you don't want to leave them wondering if you ever received their package.

Enforce Tester Compliance

It's not uncommon for some testers to be slow to return beta units after a test. In other cases, testers can flat out ignore your requests to return your beta device. When this happens, it is helpful to have a tester compliance process in place. You can do this by putting together a series of reminders to send to noncompliant testers. We use a combination of emails and phone calls to remind testers to return their units. If you have access to a legal team, it's worth having them give you the right language to use in your notices.

CONCLUSION

Establishing efficient and cost-effective shipping and logistics procedures can make a world of difference to your beta test. Small things like unorganized inventory or packaging mishaps can turn a fairly straightforward beta kickoff into a nightmare. Undelivered products mean untested products and unhappy testers. Good inventory and shipping processes will not only ensure internal efficiency, but will also mean your testers will get the device and start testing on time. Developing effective shipping and logistics procedures is the key to elevating your beta management processes from good to great. When you do, you will not only increase the likelihood of a successful beta, but you will also become an all-star beta manager in the process.



Log Returned Devices

The best way to keep track of a just-returned beta unit is to log it. You can do this by re-scanning each unit's tracking number or by entering the unit's serial number and the date you received it in a spreadsheet.

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Delta Testing Solutions

Leading product ops teams use Centercode to identify real-world issues to fix, areas to improve, and what their users love in order to build amazing products.



Centercode's delta testing platform is built on decades of experience user testing the world's most successful products. Our platform equips you with the automation, best practices, and processes you need to get actionable user insights for any use case.

PRODUCT LAUNCH

Engage your **Target Market** to successfully bring new products and services to market

USE CASES:

- Beta Tests
- User Acceptance Tests
- Field Tests

PRODUCT GROWTH

Recruit **Existing Customers** to continuously mature live products and services

USE CASES:

- Progressive Delivery
- Early Access
- Customer Advisory Boards

CUSTOMER ZERO

Gather **Employee** feedback to enhance your products while fostering a product culture

USE CASES:

- Alpha Tests
- Dogfooding
- Employee Tests

COMPETITIVE EDGE

Enlist **Competitors' Customers** to rapidly gain actionable intel about their products

USE CASES:

- Competitive Intelligence
- Market Testing
- Comparative Research

DELTA TESTING PLATFORM

Get a live demo of Centercode to experience the easy way to run your user tests, including:

- Auto-generated test designs
- Ted, your tester engagement bot
- Smart feedback prioritization
- Instant KPIs and dashboards

SCHEDULE A DEMO

WHY CENTERCODE?

Increase Revenue
½ ☆ INCREASE
in product ratings

Release Sooner
50% FASTER
test cycles

Gain Participation
75% INCREASE
in tester engagement

Save Time
40% + DECREASE
in time managing tests