

Dabbawala supply chain model



The dabba is a cylindrical container made of tin and sometimes aluminum. The delivery location of the client is painted on the top. The coding system is based on shapes and colors and works well for speaking to the workers. The lunchboxes are sorted according to the coding system at the nearest origin train station and then grouped for hub transfer in the Mumbai railway system. The transfer from origin to hub usually happens in designated carts.

The Dabbawala Coding Alphabet

With a complex system such as the dabbawala supply chain, it is impossible to maintain it without a code for identifying the various dabbas including their origins and destinations. Since the dabbas change hands several times in their journey to and from the client, the dabbawalas need a system to recognize them or there would be greater chances of loss along the way. As per the organization's admission, most of the dabbawalas are semi-illiterate with limited school training so the tiffin boxes need a system of identification that can be easily understood. These systems are critical in the development of a network and in the dabbawalas' case, they are made up of four or five different symbols with varying colors painted on the containers. However, the different dabbawala groups do not share the same style since each group has complete autonomy to manage its work. Therefore, the codes are often unique to each group depending on the regions of origin or the symbols that most group members can relate with (Roncaglia et al., 2013). Usually, these symbols are common to the Indian cultural context such as religious allegories, the letters of the Devanagari alphabet and in some cases, geometrical symbols.

Due to each group having its own unique combination of letters and colors, it is almost impossible for a tiffin to be misplaced or taken by another dabbawala as they are usually the first to recognize when a tiffin does not belong in their particular delivery line. Only the dabbawalas in a particular group can recognize dabbas that are not part of their usual line in which cases, they reject them immediately (Roncaglia et al., 2013). This proved to be useful as it facilitated the movement of dabbas in 1993 when there were bomb attacks on the railway lines as the police trusted the dabbawalas enough not to search their tiffins.

The figure below illustrates the current coding system for the dabbawalas;

Figure 3: Dabbawala Tiffin Coding System

In order to give information about tiffin's source, route, and destination, the dabbawalas have a simple coding system consisting of letters and numbers painted on the lids of the dabbas. Figure 3 above gives the base coding system as each delivery line has its own unique letters and codes.

E: the area from which the tiffin is collected within Vile Parle. In this case, ' E' stands for Hanuman Road.

VLP: this is the origin railway station. VLP, in this case, stands for Vile Parle Station

9AI12: the area where the tiffin will be delivered within the Churchgate zone with 9 standing for Nariman Point, AI stands for the building to which the dabba will be delivered (AI represents Air India building), and 12 being the floor to which the dabba will be delivered. However, although 12 is indicated

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in this case, the dabbas are usually delivered to the ground floors of the tall building.