PUSHPULL · FOUNDER'S FIELD GUIDE

DTC SHIPPING BASICS

A plain-English primer on shipping beverage alcohol to consumers without shipping your license with it

Education from the field, not legal advice. Verify everything with your attorney and each state.

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Host, DRINK UP Podcast

READ THIS FIRST

To the Founder Holding This

Every founder eventually gets the DM: 'Do you ship?' And every founder feels the tug to answer yes, because it feels like free money and modern brands ship things. Here is the truth this book exists to install: shipping beverage alcohol to consumers is the most regulated move you will ever make, the rules change by state and by product category, and the penalty for guessing wrong is not a fine you budget for. It can be your license, which is to say, your company.

This book will not make you a compliance expert, and it is absolutely not legal advice. What it will do is teach you the shape of the problem, the order of operations that keeps founders out of trouble, and the exact questions to ask the three professionals who can actually clear you for takeoff: your attorney, your fulfillment partner, and your carrier representative. Boring is the goal. In DTC, boring is what profitable looks like.

Truthfully,

Sam

THE LAY OF THE LAND

Why 'Just Ship It' Is Not a Thing

DTC is a legal carve-out around this system, and every state carves differently.

The three-tier system was built to put a licensed middle between producers and the public. DTC shipping is a set of state-by-state exceptions to that design, and the exceptions are wildly uneven. As a general shape: wine enjoys the broadest permissions, with most states allowing some form of licensed winery-to-consumer shipping. Beer is allowed in a smaller set. Spirits are the narrowest of all, legal in only a limited number of states. Where DTC is allowed, it comes with homework: a direct shipper permit for each destination state, tax collection and reporting there, quantity limits, approved carriers, and adult signature on delivery. And one absolute that never changes: the postal service cannot carry your alcohol, period. That one is federal.

Three more realities to hold onto. Control states, where the government runs the liquor business, play by their own book entirely. 'Legal in my state' says nothing about the destination state, and it is the destination's rules that govern the shipment. And the rules move: states revise these laws often enough that yesterday's yes can be today's violation, which is why this playbook builds a calendar, not just a checklist.

PART I

The Mindset

Principle 1: Legal beats fast

In every other channel I will tell you to move quicker, call sooner, push harder. Not here. DTC is the one lane where the slow founder wins, because the fast founder is building revenue on a foundation that one audit can erase. Ship to eight states legally rather than forty hopefully.

> ***The brand that ships slower and legal outlives the brand that ships fast and lucky.***

Principle 2: Your category is not their category

The winery founder in your accelerator cohort ships to most of the country. That fact is nearly useless to you if you make spirits or an RTD, because the law sorts by category first. Never borrow another founder's map. Build your own, for your product, from the destination states' own rules.

Principle 3: Rules change, so calendar the check

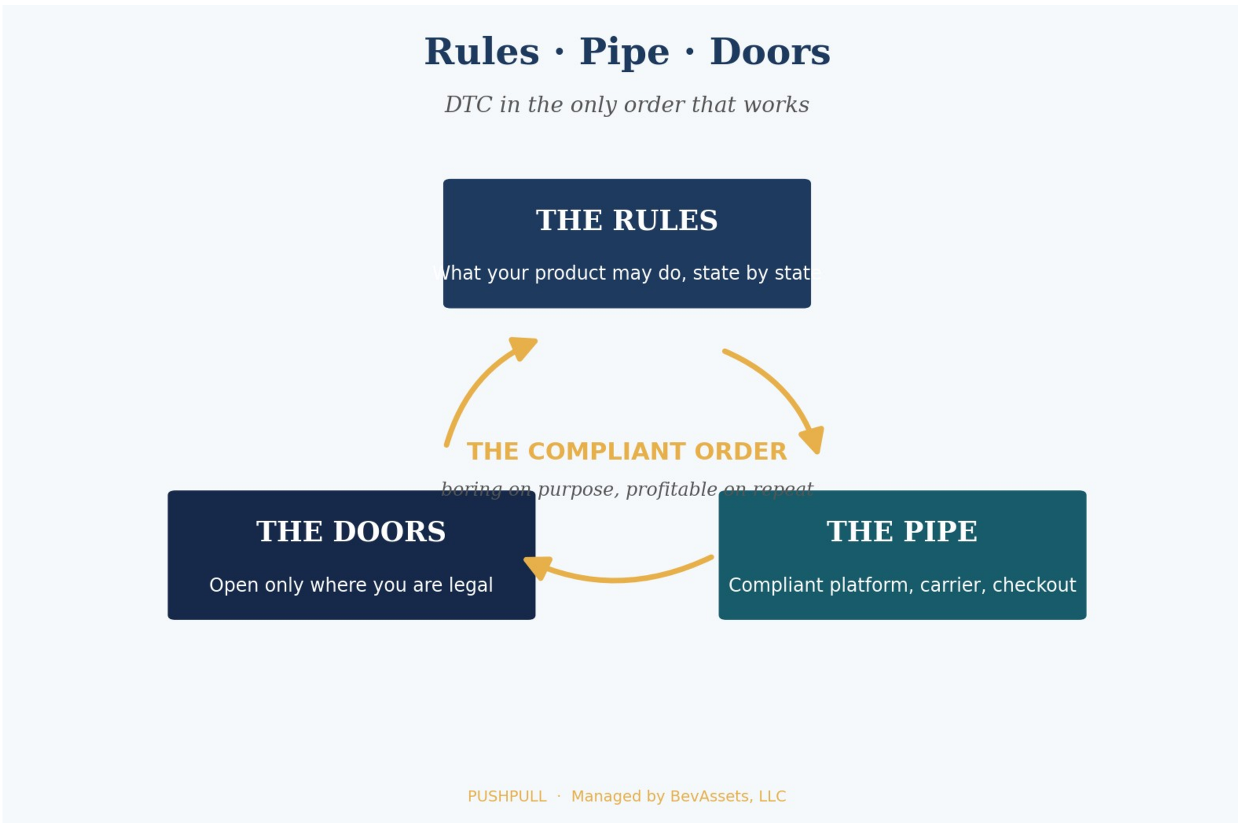
DTC compliance is not a project you finish. It is a subscription you maintain. States revise statutes, carriers revise agreements, platforms revise policies. The founders who stay clean are not smarter. They have a recurring twice-yearly review on the calendar and professionals on speed dial.

SAM SAYS

> *“Nobody ever lost a license by double-checking. Plenty have lost one by being sure.”*

PART II

The Operating System: Rules, Pipe, Doors



The only order that works. Doors open last.

Chapter 1: The Rules

Month one is research, and none of it is glamorous. Establish what your product category may do at all. Confirm what your home state requires of you as an outbound shipper. Build the preliminary list of destination states that appear open to your category, straight from state alcohol board sources, not from blog posts. Then take that homework to a beverage attorney and a licensed fulfillment partner and let them correct it. Their corrections are the deliverable.

SCENARIO: THE MAP THAT SHRANK, THEN HELD

> *A spirits founder walks in wanting to ship to twenty states her research flagged as open. Her attorney and fulfillment partner cut the real list to a handful once permits, taxes, and volume caps are weighed against her size. She launches to those, cleanly. A year later she has added more, one at a time, and has never once had a shipment stopped. The founders who started with twenty are mostly not shipping at all anymore.*

Chapter 2: The Pipe

Month two builds the machine: an ecommerce platform that supports alcohol compliance rather than merely tolerating it, age verification at checkout and adult signature at the door, the carrier alcohol agreement signed and current, permits and tax registrations filed for each go-state, and packaging that survives both the truck and the inspection. Then the test order to a legal state, tracked end to end, signature confirmed, taxes recorded. One boring, perfect box.

SCENARIO: THE CHECKOUT THAT SAID NO

> *A customer in a closed state tries to order. The founder's checkout, built correctly, refuses the address and politely explains, offering the store locator instead. The customer buys locally two days later. The refusal was not lost revenue. It was the compliance system doing the exact job that keeps every other state open.*

Chapter 3: The Doors

Month three opens for business, deliberately: launch to the cleared states only, monitor every delivery for the signature confirmation, reconcile taxes monthly, and put the twice-yearly rules review on the calendar before the first promotion goes out. Expansion from here is one state at a time, each one cleared through the same pipe, never because a marketplace or a moment made it feel urgent.

PART III

The Frameworks

Framework 1: The Four Questions Before Any Box Leaves

Is this destination state legal for my product, today? Is age verified at checkout and at the door? Is the carrier agreement current and correct for this shipment? Would I be comfortable if a regulator opened this box? Four yeses or the box waits. This is the pin card at the back of the book.

Framework 2: The State Go-List

One living document: every state, its status for your category (go, no, or unclear), the permit and tax obligations where you ship, the source and date of the last verification, and the next review date. Unclear means no until a professional says otherwise.

Framework 3: The Landed-Cost Math

DTC revenue is a gross number wearing a costume. Before celebrating, subtract the permit fees spread across expected volume, per-state taxes, compliant packaging, carrier alcohol surcharges, the platform's cut, and the cost of the signature service. If the bottle nets less than it does through your distributor after all that, DTC is a brand service, not a profit center, and you should run it, or not, knowing which one it is.

PART IV

The 90-Day Plan

Slower than you want. Faster than a violation.

Days 1 to 30: Know the Rules

1. Write down exactly what your product is, legally: category, proof or ABV, package. The law sorts by this first.
2. Confirm your home state's requirements for outbound consumer shipping.
3. Draft the preliminary State Go-List from state alcohol board sources only.
4. Book the attorney conversation and bring the Go-List to be corrected.
5. Interview two licensed fulfillment or compliance platforms.
6. Read your carrier's alcohol shipping agreement, all of it, and note the signature rule.

Days 31 to 60: Build the Pipe

7. Choose the platform and fulfillment path that handles compliance natively.
8. Turn on age verification at checkout and adult signature at delivery, and test both.
9. File permits and tax registrations for your cleared go-states.
10. Build compliant packaging that survives the truck and satisfies the label rules.
11. Configure the checkout to refuse closed states gracefully, with a store locator.
12. Run one complete test order to a legal state and audit every step of it.

Days 61 to 90: Open the Doors

13. Launch to cleared states only, and say so plainly on the site.
14. Confirm signature capture on every early delivery, personally.
15. Reconcile taxes and reports for month one, on time, in every state you shipped.
16. Calendar the twice-yearly rules review and assign it an owner.
17. Run the Landed-Cost Math on your first thirty days of real orders.
18. Decide with numbers: scale it, hold it, or park it. All three are wins if they are chosen.

TRUTHFULLY

The Boring Badge of Honor

Nobody posts a reel about tax reconciliation. There is no applause for the checkout that correctly refuses an order. But two years from now, when a competitor's shipping program becomes a cautionary tale at an industry dinner, your boring, compliant, profitable little pipe will still be running, and the trade will know you as a brand that does things right. In an industry built on trust and licenses, that reputation compounds better than any growth hack ever invented.

Truthfully,

Sam

Crush it. Carefully.

THE BACK POCKET

Questions, Cards, and Take-Withs

Ask your attorney

'For my exact product and package, which states can I ship to today, what permits and tax registrations does each require, and what changed in the last twelve months that I would not know about?'

Ask your fulfillment or platform partner

'Show me exactly where your system blocks a non-compliant order: closed state, quantity cap, failed age check. And when a state changes its rules, how fast does that change reach my checkout?'

Ask your carrier representative

'Walk me through the alcohol agreement for my category: approved service levels, labeling, the adult signature requirement, and what happens, step by step, if a package comes back undeliverable.'

Print these two

Pin This Next to the Shipping Station

The daily discipline, one card

BEFORE ANY BOX LEAVES

Is this state legal for my product, today?

Is the age check on, at checkout AND at the door?

Is the carrier agreement current and correct?

Would I be comfortable if a regulator opened this box?

And when any answer is 'I think so':

STOP AND VERIFY. THEN SHIP.

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The four questions. Next to the shipping station, forever.

DTC Shipping Bingo

Mark them as they happen. Compliance humor is still humor.

Carrier agreement, page forty	State website last updated years ago	'USPS? Never.' lesson learned	Age check saves you exactly once	Permit fee beats first month's revenue
Attorney says 'it depends'	Control state plot twist	Fulfillment partner goes quiet	First fully compliant order	Adult signature annoys a customer (good)
Sales tax to four decimals	Winter weather hold	**FREE: JUST PICK UP THE PHONE**	Package insurance finally pays off	'Ship to my cousin in [dry county]?' No.
Marketplace delists you randomly	Reinstated, no explanation	Spreadsheet named FINAL_v7	First repeat DTC customer	Unboxing post you did not ask for
Rate change email at 6 a.m.	You quote the rules to a platform rep	Three-tier debate at dinner	The margin math finally works	You read this playbook twice

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DTC bingo. 'Attorney says it depends' is the free-est square ever printed.

APPENDIX A

Where You Can Ship, as of July 2026

This is the question every founder asks first, so here is the honest snapshot, verified against current industry trackers in July 2026. Read it with both hands on the disclaimer: these laws move constantly, the live version of this map in your PUSHPULL member hub is re-verified twice a year, and none of this replaces your attorney or the destination state's own rules.

The category decides the map. Verified July 2026; confirm before you ship.

Wine: the wide road

Winery-to-consumer shipping is permitted in 48 states plus Washington, D.C. Utah is the one full ban. Mississippi opened only in July 2025 and remains restricted, and Delaware comes online during 2026 with conditions. Every open state still expects its permit, its taxes, its volume caps, and adult signature at the door. Note that shipping as a retailer is a separate and much smaller list of about a dozen states; a winery permit does not cover it.

Spirits: the narrow road

Roughly ten jurisdictions, most with strings. Kentucky, Nebraska, North Dakota, New Hampshire, Alaska, and Washington, D.C. are broadly open with permits, with Alaska excluding its dry communities. Arizona admits only craft distilleries under twenty thousand gallons a year. New York admits craft distilleries with reciprocity rules, made permanent in 2024. California is running a one-year pilot from January 2026 to January 2027 for craft distillers under one hundred fifty thousand gallons, permit required, capped at 2.25 liters per consumer per day; watch whether it renews. Rhode Island ships only what you bought while standing at the distillery. Nevada prohibits spirits shipping outright.

Beer and RTDs

Breweries can ship to ten states plus D.C.: Alaska, Kentucky, Nebraska, New Hampshire, North Dakota, Ohio, Oregon, Pennsylvania, Vermont, and Virginia, many with annual volume caps. RTDs are not their own category anywhere: a malt-based RTD follows the beer map, a spirit-based one follows the spirits map, and that classification decision is exactly the kind of question you bring to your attorney.

APPENDIX B

Glossary: How Shipping Talks

DTC. Direct to consumer: shipping from you to a drinker's door under a state's specific exception to the three-tier system.

Direct shipper permit. The license a destination state requires before you may ship to its residents. Per state, with fees and filings.

Control state. A state where government controls liquor sales. Expect a different rulebook entirely.

Adult signature. Carrier-collected proof that a person 21 or over received the package. Not optional, anywhere.

Fulfillment house. A licensed partner that stores and ships on your behalf and, done right, carries compliance machinery you do not have to build.

Carrier alcohol agreement. The contract FedEx or UPS requires before accepting your packages. The postal service is never an option; that ban is federal.

Landed cost. What a delivered bottle truly costs after permits, taxes, packaging, surcharges, and signature fees. The honest number.

Quantity limit. Per-person or per-household caps many states place on shipments. Your platform should enforce them so you never have to remember.

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