



Distribution Center MANAGEMENT

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Managing people, materials and costs in the warehouse or DC

Facility Management

Automating dock scheduling gives grocery distributor a big productivity boost

Scheduling appointments with trucks at the receiving docks is never an easy task. Many DC's still rely on taking appointments by telephone, which can be both inefficient and lead to scheduling overlaps and mixed-up communication.

"If every delivery that comes into a distribution center has to take place over the phone, it's pretty clear that you're going to have an inefficient process," says Chuck Bealke, vice president of transportation solutions at software firm Retalix. "You're going to have people on hold, you're going to have callbacks, and you're going to have conflicts that you're going to have to figure out manually."

That's why C&S Wholesale Grocers, the second-largest grocery wholesaler in the U.S., wanted to automate scheduling at its receiving docks. With 34 distribution centers scheduling close to 35,000 receiving appointments a month, the company wanted to move from a manual, phone-based appointment system to a more automated, online one.

The company also needed to create a more efficient scheduling process, improve efficiency at the receiving dock, centralize scheduling as much as possible, and consolidate some of its scheduling personnel among the 34 facilities.

Online scheduling reduces confusion at the receiving dock

To achieve its goals, C&S implemented a new dock scheduling system that would allow its

carriers to schedule appointments at any of its DCs via the Internet.

According to Bealke, improving efficiencies at the receiving dock has a domino effect across the rest of the distribution center and both reduces confusion and improves efficiency.

"If every appointment you're giving out is based on a two-hour appointment time frame, you're bound to get into a congested nightmare at the dock in terms of how long each appointment is actually going to need to unload," he says.

"The same goes with labor too. You can look at your antiquated schedule and plan your labor based on that, but if you do, you're going to have some peaks and valleys. You're going to have periods where you plan too much labor and periods where you have not planned enough labor."

C&S implemented a dock scheduling system designed to eliminate those problems. The system lets carriers go online to schedule appointments. The software tracks due dates, forecasts estimated loading and unloading durations, and recommends the appropriate warehouse dock and door to unload the truck. It also helps C&S optimize the receiving schedule, and each DC manager can plan the amount of labor needed at

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various times during the day.

The system not only makes scheduling easier for DC managers, it also improves their relationships with the freight carriers.

“In a lot of distribution centers, there can be as many as four people scheduling appointments on a daily basis,” Bealke says. “Then carriers have to call in and wait on the phone for 20 minutes for an appointment, then they are told, ‘I’ll call you back.’ Now they log on, and in less than a minute or so, they’ve got an appointment.”

Visibility brings a 50 percent productivity boost

The system went live at the first C&S warehouse last March, and in less than three months, the company had rolled it out to all 34 of its DCs. Almost immediately after implementing it, the distributor saw a major boost in productivity.

“We streamlined our inbound scheduling process over a period of four months and already see a 40 to 50 percent improvement in our scheduling productivity,” says Joe Caracappa, chief information officer at C&S. “The system enabled our scheduler to receive and set an appointment in half the time required by the previous system. The Web scheduling functionality greatly reduced the overall number of phone calls and manual entry. The software also provides much greater visibility to our ware-

Combine dock scheduling with yard management to eliminate truck idling time

It’s one thing to schedule appointments at the loading dock, but what happens if the trucks can’t make it through your DC’s yard to be at the dock in time?

That’s why it’s important to link your dock scheduling system with a yard management system, says Chuck Bealke, vice president of transportation solutions at software firm Retalix. Together, the two can work in tandem to eliminate congestion and wait time for truck drivers.

Historically, yard control and resource and equipment management have been separate operational functions of the warehouse. By linking the two, you can automate and control the arrival/departure, yard location, yard movement, and readiness of trailers. That reduces the amount of time trucks sit idling in the yard, reducing emissions and keeping everyone productive.

house, receiving, and procurement teams.”

Caracappa estimates that vendors and carriers now schedule at least 60 percent of their appointments through the system, via the Internet. In November 2008, they scheduled more than 21,000 appointments online.

And that’s just the beginning, says Bealke. “No company as large as C&S can make such a dramatic change without it taking some time to settle in, so the productivity improvements will continue to grow for them. The company just needs time to start measuring and really aggregate all that information.”

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