

Warehouse investments deliver improved UK customer service

Fastbolt Distributors (UK) Limited has used the summer months to put into effect a series of investments at its Milton Keynes warehouse, which are already, quite literally, delivering enhanced service to customers throughout the UK. Warehouse manager, Sam Brown told us more.

Early in 2012 Sam Brown identified to Fastbolt directors that the increased volume handled through its UK warehouse was presenting a number of bottlenecks, which threatened to undermine the company's commitment to delivery service. Characteristically, rather than looking to 'band-aid' the issue, Fastbolt took the opportunity to fundamentally review its UK logistics operation. Sam identified efficiency improvements that would not only solve the issues identified but could also provide the platform for Fastbolt to take an important step forward in enhancing the service provided to its distributor customers.

The two major components of the investment were in machinery and systems. Fastbolt invested in the latest generation of Jungheinrich vertical order pickers – the EKS 312 model designed for narrow aisle warehouse environments and providing not only increased versatility but also a startling increase in speed to location. Additional stability wheels and a powerful 3-phase motor mean the platform can travel upwards and forwards simultaneously with assured levels of safety. The new trucks are RFID ready and additional foot controls also contribute to greater operator flexibility.

"At the same time as delivering the new trucks in August," explains Sam, "Jungheinrich upgraded our existing equipment, so the trucks can reach optimum speed quicker." The result for Sam, having reluctantly but necessarily consigned the oldest truck to the recyclers, is a completely revitalised, seven-strong warehouse fleet, which is "not only a joy to operate but also

delivers massive improvements in picking speed."

To further enhance both safety and speed, Fastbolt used the summer months to upgrade some of its racking and level and resurface the entire warehouse floor.

Alongside these major improvements in the hardware, Fastbolt is implementing advanced new warehouse management software, already successfully installed and operating in its German operation. The Inconso system interfaces directly with the Group's established SAP core business system to achieve radical stock handling efficiencies. "I was fortunate to spend time in Gronau operating the new system," says Sam Brown, "so that I was fully familiar with it before we installed it in Milton Keynes. The time there also allowed me to identify some minor adjustments that would be needed for the UK warehouse."

Paperless, bar code based technology, the new system delivers a series of important benefits to Fastbolt and, indirectly its customers. The use of bar code scanning throughout reduce the potential for error in all warehouse processes. Its full integration with SAP, ensuring accurate and automatic transfer of data, eliminates time consuming keying, particularly during the late afternoon pressure period when orders are being packed for despatch.

At the other end of the process the system ensures the correct inspection of incoming goods, improving the accuracy and speed of put away, and making the stock available to the sales department faster. The system will also highlight where incoming box quantities are at variance with Fastbolt's norm for each size



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It is in between goods arriving and being despatch, however, that the Inconso system delivers maximum benefits both in terms of picking efficiency and inventory accuracy. For the first time Fastbolt UK is able to split orders across warehouse operatives and trucks, with the system determining the most efficient route for each. “We can now pick multiple orders on each truck,” says Sam, “with the bar code scanning system making sure each order is accurate. Multiple order picking reduces travel distance for each truck and therefore picking time. Because the system knows the location and schedule for each truck it also avoids two trucks attempting to access the same aisle at the same time.”

“Condensing is also so much quicker,” says Sam. “The system includes a feature that allows us to carry out stock checks at the same time as picking, which means we can confirm locations are empty. That fits in really well with our cyclical inventory check system and reduces the number of counts we would otherwise have to do to ensure a complete annual check.”

The warehouse management system is flexible in allowing the company to decide, depending on the order flow at any given time, the priority between picking, stock checking and condensing. “For example, if we receive an order for a full pallet of one size at a quieter time in the day, the system can opt to pick three one-third pallets thus releasing these locations, something that is important when your warehouse is running close to optimum capacity.”

This inherent flexibility is one of the major benefits, Fastbolt UK managing director, Graham Joyce sees in the new system: “The ability to improve your efficiency to commercial advantage is phenomenal.” He is also very clear about the motivational benefits of the improvements, alongside which Fastbolt has carried out a wider refurbishment of the Milton Keynes building, internally and externally. “Our people are proud of the business, which makes it even more important we ensure a clean, pleasant as well as effective working environment that justifies that pride.”

Fastbolt’s ultimate aim was to extend its order cut-off by a further hour to 5pm, which it did at the beginning of September,

with an immediate positive response from customers. “We needed to implement all these improvements internally,” says Graham Joyce, “but our relationship with Aspray24, as our long standing delivery partner, was just as fundamental in achieving an improved, and most importantly completely reliable, service.” At a systems level, the Inconso system will integrate with that of Aspray24, again alleviating a substantial amount of administrative work, in producing exactly the labels required for each consignment without additional keying, even where



the delivery is direct to site on behalf of a Fastbolt customer. At a management level, agree both Graham and Sam, it is about the series of relationship links at various levels between the two companies and Aspray’s own commitment to providing an effective solution to its customer’s needs. “It is a very close working relationship,” says Graham Joyce. “Aspray24 are proactive in supporting Fastbolt’s development. It has been a simple case of explaining what we need to achieve. They came back with a series of options from which we were able to select the best to match our new systems.”

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