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Manifesting Made Manifest

By D. Douglas Graham

Manifesting software enables freight cost calculation based on an item's ship-to location, arrival priority, weight and physical dimensions. While such solutions are nothing new, they have evolved along with many other distribution technologies into topnotch stuff with significant time and money-saving potential for wholesale operations.

The term "manifesting" refers to the production of all documentation accompanying the delivery of physical goods. The concept is as old as shipping itself, as evidenced by surviving cuneiform cargo lists created in Babylonia more than three thousand years ago.

Though goods transport methodologies and technologies have advanced light years since those days, many wholesale organizations continue to rely on manifesting methods not significantly more sophisticated than those employed by the ancients. For some wholesalers, paper-based manifesting is still the norm along with all attendant inefficiencies.

"Advanced manifesting technology has been around since the advent of the Web," explains Eric Allais, President/CEO, PathGuide Technologies Inc. (www.pathguide.com), a Seattle-based developer of real-time warehouse management solutions for small to mid-sized industrial distributors. "It's not unusual, however, for a company with an extremely sophisticated WMS to lack the backup of a superior manifesting solution." Such an organization may find it difficult to ship on time. It's not impossible to deliver on shipping promises the old fashioned way, but you probably won't without adding staff and building more cost into your organization."

Pain Relief

New, and not so recently-invented solutions ease the pain imposed by paper manifesting and make the workday of a shipping professional much less stressful, says Charles Fallon, a partner at KOM International (www.komintl.com), a supply chain consultant headquartered in Montreal, Canada.

"Distributors have a couple of manifesting solution options available to them," he explains. "Blended solutions are a component of WMS, while a standalone will work with or without it. In both cases a company has the choice of either

buying and installing software or going to the Web, and paying for the functions it actually needs. The latter is the emerging approach as the Web offers access to advanced functionality at reasonable cost.”

Top solutions significantly reduce clerical work, Fallon adds. Such programs also enable customer service-enhancing EDI transactions, and reduce errors by limiting the amount of misinformation that can come about as a result of human handling.

A Tool for Better Customer Service

Manifesting solution can enhance customer service but all systems are not created equal. User interface can be clunky and nonintuitive in the case of lesser programs, slowing package processing. A great solution will have no shortcomings in this area, and will also have the ability to integrate with the systems of shippers and cargo carriers in order to keep up to date on their freight charges. Looking for a best freight rate via a manifesting system should be no more challenging than shopping for a super travel deal on Priceline.com. Customers will thank you for it, as they would for any value-add with the potential for trimming their cost of doing business.

“Having instant access to shipping information is very impressive to customers,” says Tom Lorenz, vice president, Lorenz & Jones Marine Distributors Inc., an Iowa-based wholesale provider of boating accessories to customers in the upper Midwest. “In the old days, when a customer inquired about any aspect of shipping you had no choice but to consult a paper manifest, a process entailing a good deal of effort on the part of the distributor and roughly an equal amount of inconvenience for the customer. Now just about anything you need to know about a shipment is only a click away, and for us that’s made all the difference in the world.”

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