



The Distribution Team

We wrote THE BOOK on Distribution Inventory Management

Picking Should Not Be A Scavenger Hunt

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You have heard many times that inventory accuracy is the key to managing a successful operation. There are many ways that we skirt the rules and create inventory inaccuracy. We do it by not issuing the proper documentation for products, we take things from stock for Will Call that never get picked up and we take items as samples that are never recorded. Unfortunately, there are many ways to increase our inventory inaccuracy. One thing we can control very easily is making sure our picking processes are done with a high degree of accuracy.

When you have a new warehouse (I call it a vault) person, there is always the dilemma of what to have them do in those early days. Should they just watch the more experienced personnel? Should they clean the place up? Should they receive product? The answer is simple **THEY SHOULD PICK!** The reason you want your new vault personnel to pick items is because you already have someone checking the order before it is shipped. You have a built in safety net for the new person. They will make mistakes just because they are new.

If you want to help your new vault personnel learn your products and system quicker, try sitting down with them every night for one week and go through the orders they picked that day. These are the ones that were corrected at the shipping table. You want to talk to them about why they picked the items they did and why some items were picked wrong. You are not grilling them for inaccuracy, but you are trying to determine why matching up the pick ticket with the product location and product did not go as smoothly as you might have imagined.

The answers you get might surprise you. It is usually not because the person is new and does not know squat about your products. That will come over time. It is often because the pick ticket, the item location and the product descriptions do not match up very well.

I suggest that everyone take a pick ticket and go pick some products from time to time. Even if you are very familiar with the products, this little exercise will point out just what you are hoping your new person points out in that first week. With all the activity, changes and vault shuffling over they years, the pick ticket (your roadmap to finding items) does not match up very well with your street signs (bin locations).

Labeling your vault can be done in many different ways. Some choose to have everything bar coded and use a Warehouse Management System to help with put away, picking and shipping. Some use hand made labels that are easily changed when required. Some use

the old method of just walking around to find items or become familiar with where things might be TODAY. In an effort to increase your inventory accuracy and getting your personnel to increase their overall efficiency, I suggest you go through your vault and make sure everything is labeled clearly.

Some of you might be saying this right now Bob the vault manager knows where everything is so we do not need to label the vault. You might be right, Bob does know where everything is, but will your next new vault person? How long will it take for Bob to get that knowledge transferred to the new person's head? What happens if some but not all of the knowledge comes across? How many mistakes will others in the vault make when Bob is not around? What happens when Bob gets sick, leaves or retires?

Labeling your vault is critical to inventory success. I suggest you use colors as much as possible. Big color charts, poster boards or aisle markers help people learn quickly where certain products are kept. Row labels, shelf labels and even bin labels can be color coded to enhance the learning process. Open floor space should also be labeled. This is critical because at certain times of the year, product is moved in and out of that space but the label can be used to identify product location.

Step one should be to go through your vault and make sure every inch of space has a label or address. Be creative. If you can use colors to identify certain vendor lines or product categories, use them. If you can use colors to help identify slight variances in the product (width, texture, thickness or voltage) then do it. For example, I have seen distributors with racks and racks of pipe. To the naked eye, it looks all the same. But at receipt, they put different colored tape on the end to help quickly identify the length and width of the pipe. This made a huge impact on their overall inventory accuracy. Picking and subsequently cutting the wrong pipe was virtually eliminated. A simple color chart was clearly displayed next to the piperacking for easy reference.

Now let's go to step two. Take a look at the product master files and see what fields you can use to help the pickers make the right pick all the time? Are there fields that are not being used right now that you can use to identify a color scheme? How about the product description field? Is there an option to make it more descriptive from a picking standpoint? Would it make sense to print the entire product description on the pick ticket instead of just the short version? Look at the quantity fields to ensure that when we say pick one or an each, the pickers know if it is one piece, one pack or one case.

The location fields on the pick ticket might also be expanded. Maybe we need to revamp the pick ticket print routine to expand the field to more spaces. Maybe we can use the primary and secondary location fields in the inventory master file differently and have them guide our pickers better.

When it comes to picking, there is no set way to make it happen. But there are many ways to help the accuracy of our picks. Your goal is to make the directions you are giving the picker (the pick ticket) match up as closely as possible with the street signs (vault labels) as possible. You might want to add in the directions that you need to go to the

green aisle instead of the red one because this product is in the green aisle. Enhancing the print routines for your pick tickets is rather easy to do. The more descriptive you can make your pick ticket, the better off you will be. Look at all opportunities to add information on the pick ticket (longer product descriptions, more exact location detail, more specific quantity descriptions and maybe even some color coded identifiers) can help. Winning a scavenger hunt isn't all just luck, it is knowing which places to go to find the items on your scavenger hunt list.

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