

## CHECKLISTS ARE THE KEY TO PREVENTATIVE MAINTENANCE

BY JASON BADER, PRINCIPAL - THE DISTRIBUTION TEAM



THE  
DISTRIBUTION  
TEAM

Don't you hate it when things don't work in the warehouse? You jump on the forklift, ready to unload a 40 foot trailer, and the battery is dead. As you are cursing your misfortune, you grab the pallet jack and the hydraulic pump is shot. The thoughts of creeks and paddles are now dancing through your mind. This is going to be a really bad day.

I have recently been teaching a class on warehouse management. When we reach the topic of preventative maintenance, the room is filled with stories of mishaps and the law according to Murphy. For those of you who are unfamiliar with this expression, Murphy's law suggests that anything that can go wrong, will go wrong. In a distribution warehouse, it is usually at the worst possible time. Mechanical things break down. Especially, if they are not maintained properly.

Who is supposed to remember the maintenance schedule of every piece of equipment? The warehouse manager? The branch manager? The individual operator? Most preventative maintenance tends to fall through the cracks. We assume that it is someone else's responsibility and ultimately an item fails when it is most mission critical. Every owner I know would rather invest in maintenance, than pay for repair after it is too late. So how do we get ahead of the problem? It all comes down to a system of checklists.

Checklists are the key to preventative maintenance. We simply can't expect our team to prioritize maintenance without reminders. By developing a series of required inspection documents, we are emphasizing the care of company assets. If you are a

company that shares profit with the employees, it is easy to remind them how much it costs when a piece of mission critical equipment goes down.

Let's start with the delivery vehicles. When a truck goes down, we are clearly in jeopardy of failing to serve the customer. It is really frustrating to have a vehicle break down with half a load still waiting to be delivered. It is maddening when the breakdown occurred because the transmission fluid had not been changed since we put it in service. Start with a weekly inspection of the vehicle. This inspection should be completed by the driver and reviewed by their direct supervisor. Break the checklist down to functional areas: fluids, lights and signals, tires, etc. If you are unsure about the items on the list, consult the dealer who sold you the truck. They can help advise you on preventative maintenance. Don't forget about sales vehicles. I once had a vehicle break down because the sales person didn't know it was his responsibility to change the oil.

Don't overlook critical equipment that should be on each vehicle: safety gear, proper jobsite safety apparel, cargo tie down equipment and material handling equipment. Work with your drivers to develop a solid list. Don't forget to include a weekly cleaning. The cleanliness of your delivery vehicles speaks volumes about the professionalism of your company.

The next area we should consider is the material handling equipment. These are the forklifts, hoists, pallet jacks, order picking carts and even the hand trucks. Basically, I am referring to any piece of equipment that helps us move inventory in the warehouse.

Develop a weekly checklist for each of these items. Obviously, forklifts and lifting equipment will have more points of inspection. Work with your dealer to come up with items to inspect. If necessary, pay for someone to come in and train your people. By the way, having an outside vendor come in and perform regular maintenance is perfectly acceptable. I guarantee that they are working from a checklist. Some of you may be raising an eyebrow when I ask you to include the hand truck in your program. Are these critical pieces of material handling equipment? Try moving a keg of hex nuts without one.

After the mechanical equipment, start looking at the racks and shelves that store all your money. I couldn't resist a subtle reminder that inventory is just cash. We need to inspect the condition of our shelving. Are we using the right type of shelving for our needs? Are any of the shelves sagging under the weight of our material? This is just an accident waiting to happen. Have any of the pallet racks been run into by the forklift? Believe me, this happens all the time.

Beyond inspecting defects, we should be actively replacing poor shelving choices. Do you still have plywood shelves with 2 x 4 supports on your pallet racks? This is a fire hazard and it leads to shabby looking product. Actively replace plywood racking with wire decking. It allows light to get through, prevents dust build up and allows water to reach the floor in the event of a fire. Used wire decking is really prevalent. This is a great time to upgrade.

Finally, create checklists to help you

maintain building and property fixtures. Inspect overhead doors for proper operation. Do you still have to give that outside door a little hip check to get it open? Can you properly secure the facility? Don't overlook weatherization and insulation components in the inspection. Make sure to include dock features in your program. Is the dock leveler in need of maintenance? Do you have trailer restraining devices? Many of these items are on the exterior of the building and take a pounding from the elements. They need additional attention.

Walk around the building. Are there interior or exterior lights that need to be replaced? Do you have drains in the parking lot? Is the parking area in good condition? When I was driving for my company, there were several lots I wouldn't drive in to for fear of a bent rim. If you deal with fasteners, run a magnetic floor sweeper around the lot so that you don't cause flat tires.

I know the lists can go on and on. That is the point. There are a lot of things to manage when you run a small business. When it was just one store with 5-10 employees, these things were easier to spot. Our businesses have grown over the years. We have more people and more locations to maintain. We can't expect people to take the same kind of ownership we felt in the early years. We need to help them remember.

Sit down with your operational managers. Develop checklists for all the material handling assets. Some inspections should be daily, others weekly or monthly. You all will come up with appropriate timelines. We give our people tools to be more efficient. Why jeopardize that efficiency by running equipment to the point of failure? The goal is to get ahead of a problem.

I have recently been working with a client on incorporating a preventative

maintenance program into their company. It has been our experience that no one takes it seriously until it affects their wallet. Our approach was simple. If the checklists are not completed, a portion of the branch manager's compensation is forfeited. Time will tell if they get the message. Good luck.