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Status Report: Technology

By April Terreri

Yard Management: It's About Time

YMS provide real-time views of the yard, equipment.

Ask any seasoned yard manager what the most common obstacle is in the yard and his answer invariably is: "Chaos!" Not knowing where your trailers are when you need them can really erode not only yard efficiencies, but overall warehouse efficiencies as well. Before the advent of the yard management systems (YMS), yard managers struggled to keep track of all of their trailers. We talked to several food distributors to discover how they are dealing with these issues after deploying yard management systems.

ROBERT TRANSPORT REAPS THE BENEFITS

Robert Transport was a very early adopter of YMS, having had a system in place for over the last 12 years. In fact, the company piloted C3 Solution's new yard management product in its Quebec facility in Boucherville (a suburb of Montreal), says Isabelle Robert, IT manager for the Boucherville-based company. C3 is based in Montreal.

Robert Transport operates 12 trucking terminals and 10 DCs in Ontario and Quebec. The Boucherville facility is the company's largest, with a 500,000 square-foot DC. The company moves a range of products, but primarily food products throughout the two provinces in Canada, and throughout the East Coast and Midwest in the U.S.

Before implementing C3's Yard Smart in 1997, the company struggled with the same common problems yard managers face—namely, searching for trailers, operating a manual paper and spreadsheet process, and having people in the DC or at the cross dock wait for the equipment they need as someone searched the yard.

"We could have a driver searching for a trailer for an hour or more," Robert states. "And if you have 20 drivers searching for equipment, this equates to 20 hours or more of lost productivity. If drivers lose two hours searching the yard, they could be late for deliveries and this affects customer service."

Robert notes that a primary goal in implementing Yard Smart was to increase productivity and efficiencies in the yard, on the cross-dock, and in the warehouse. Another goal was to reduce empty miles in the yard. The company has two types of standard inbound operations. It receives products that do not go into the DC, but are cross-docked and shipped immediately. Yet other trailers with customers' goods are bound for storage in the DC until customers order those products.

Yard Smart evaluates incoming loads based on the parameters Robert Transport has established for their operation, which is to make the most efficient moves possible to avoid having to shunt, explains Robert. "The best way to accomplish this is to have the trailer go right to the door and drop the load."

An optimization tool within Yard Smart assigns each task based on its priority. "We input priority parameters such as reducing empty miles in the yard, optimizing trailer moves and the urgency status of a load," explains Robert. "For instance, each door of the facility can be prioritized or can be selective of a trailer going to that specific door. This optimization helps direct trailers to the right door where products need to be stored."

On the outbound, Yard Smart helps expedite timely shipments. "If we know we have certain cutoff times we need to respect, we can schedule Yard Smart to have tasks done at specific times," Robert explains. For instance, if a load must leave every day at 4 a.m., operators request the system to have a trailer at the door by 2 a.m. "The system will meet the requirements based on the priorities we establish. So if there is no trailer at the door by 3 a.m., an alert will let you know that you need to do something to meet the 4 a.m. departure."

The efficiencies realized with Yard Smart have allowed the company to eliminate two of its eight yard trucks. "That is a 25-percent reduction," notes Robert. "We are saving significantly because each of those trucks cost \$100,000, added to a \$50,000 salary for the operators."

Now, with six yard trucks operating, Robert Transport is able to complete more yard tasks, it reduced wait time for shunts, and it reduced empty miles in the yard.

KRAFT FINDS SOLUTION TO ELIMINATE TRAILER TRACKING

Up until 2006, Kraft Foods had been managing manually 12 yards supporting six distribution campuses. This meant yard personnel were using clipboards and spreadsheets to track trailers, roaming the yard to spot trailers and hand-record trailer locations.

"Our team was searching for an optimal solution to eliminate these manual and time-consuming trailer tracking and yard checks," reports Kelly Rae, associate director, route to market for the Northfield, IL-based manufacturer. "The key driver in choosing a YMS was to gain visibility and efficiencies within the yard. We had no real-time visibility to help our transportation operations center and we believed there were opportunities for efficiencies."

In 2006, Kraft chose to pilot a product from PINC Solutions Inc., Berkeley, CA. PINC's Yard Hound with real-time location system (RTLS) technology that informs trailer parking positions, yard truck locations, and gate activities via a graphical user interface. Yard Hound's high-level visibility and low infrastructure requirements was an attractive and affordable combination for Kraft's yards with its constantly changing flow of trailers and goods, notes Rae.

"We receive real-time information through passive RFID tags that are applied to the trailers and minimal hardware is required to be installed in the yard," says Rae.

The real value of Yard Hound for Kraft is its ability to increase spotting moves per hour while reducing the amount of jockey tractor equipment, says Rae. "With this new visibility, we can now hone in and understand the peaks and valleys in the yard activities so we can adjust our spotting hours accordingly." The company was also able to eliminate using overflow lots, due to the efficient management of its yards.

Administrative time, once devoted to tracking trailers and reporting on their status, has been reduced—both at

Kraft and at carriers' locations just by logging in to the Web-based portal.

“The visibility provided by Yard Hound allows our carriers to manage their pools more efficiently,” explains Rae. “They can see how many trailers they have in our yards and they can see the status of each of those trailers—whether they are loaded or in the process of being loaded. This helps them understand when they need to send in drivers to pick up a trailer. They also know when a driver has dropped off a trailer.”

With 20/20 visibility comes enhanced communication. Yard tractor drivers no longer depend on radio communication, which data can result in becoming obsolete within minutes after transmitting information. “Since deployment, we have realized visibility has a greater impact on additional groups than originally expected,” says Rae. “Having this level of visibility available to other folks (along the supply chain) has opened up other new opportunities for us to achieve deeper efficiencies.”

AFS UTILIZES CUBE OPTIMIZATION TO CONTAIN COSTS

Even though Associated Food Stores (AFS) had been using a YMS for the past few years, the cooperative discovered that about 70 percent of its data was either inaccurate, incomplete or non-existent, reports Tim Van de Merwe, internal logistics manager for the Salt Lake City-based company.

“It was kind of a standalone system that focused on utilization of labor and equipment in the yard, with no logic to help us with utilization or efficiency,” says Van de Merwe. “So it was really a glorified pointer message system.”

Having been involved with Dallas-based Retalix for its WMS deployment, Van de Merwe began talking to the company about using Retalix Yard Management. “We wanted a solution that would interface with our routing model so routing information could inform the system regarding orders and their respective dock door assignments for better door and equipment utilization.”

Because AFS serves such a large regional territory, it must cube out every trailer leaving its yards. With 500 members throughout Montana, Idaho, Nevada, Utah, Colorado and Arizona, AFS handles distribution of grocery, general merchandise, and pharmaceutical products from its 1.4 million square-foot facility in Farr West, UT. So achieving optimum cube is essential to contain costs.

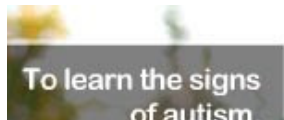
“Routing information is fed into our YMS and the logic of the system’s trailer query system matches the load to a trailer type and synchronizes getting that trailer to the right door at the right time,” explains Van de Merwe.


AFS requires specific trailer types because of its critical mission mixing commodity types, Van de Merwe reports. “Each order is matched to a trailer type, so it’s not a question of looking for any trailer—but for a specific trailer type.” Retalix’s MDS product (Mobile Distribution Center) is built into the routing model, allowing MDS to identify the required specific trailer types.

As warehouse operators are picking orders, they log into the system, triggering an alert that a trailer needs to move to a specific dock door. “The trailer bumps the dock at exactly the same time as the first pallet shows up ready to load—so this system is very dynamic,” Van de Merwe says.

Reefer trailer optimization is a huge benefit. The system dramatically reduced the amount of time reefer trailers are left running while sitting in the yard awaiting loads. Oftentimes equipment is not even being staged, being turned immediately without any downtime moving from the post-trip inspection and fuel check right to a dock location once the system has identified it and assigned it to a particular load.

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