with Peter Starvaski

Summer Six Pack

What better time than the summer to consider a six pack? No, I'm not talking about your mid-section, but the top six considerations for investigating a packing application.

For the purposes of this article, a 'packing application' is not a mechanical device that facilitates the creation of a custom box and associated packing materials. There are some very interesting technologies out there that do this; I've seen huge sheets of corrugated cardboard sitting next to impressive machines that create custom boxes on-demand. However, for this article, I am discussing software that facilitates the shipment of complicated parcel deliveries.

What are complicated parcel deliveries? They are shipments that require more than a basic carrier label and manifest. Additional labeling and documentation are required. The data elements required for that documentation complicates the process.

A generic, US domestic shipment going UPS, FedEx or USPS has no requirements to provide details on the content of the shipment. They tell you what is allowed, and it's up to you to follow the rules. Shipping software is usually tightly integrated into back-end ERP and WMS systems. The integration allows for automated data transfer between the applications. For many shippers, this is simply moving the recipient information into the shipping application. Weight is read from a scale, and the shipping software produces a compliant label and manifest.

However, if you are shipping any type of regulated commodity (pharmaceuticals, hazardous goods, etc.) or if you are shipping international (or both), then the paperwork (both hard and soft documentation) can start to become cumbersome. This is especially true in a high-volume shipping operation.

So how do we get your shipping operation in shape? Complex shipping documents and labels require details about the contents of the container. A world-class shipping application will provide for this capability through a front-end packing module.

Here are six areas to consider in creating an efficient, shipping operation that may have complex data requirements, through the use of a packing module with your shipping software.

Item Master Data — Does the application provide the ability to augment the data from your order entry system? Most agencies require more than a description. Harmonized Tariff Codes are mandatory for AES filing and Customs, and the producer and the Export ID is required for any Certificates of Origin (required for any free trade agreements). Additionally, serial numbers, lot numbers and expiration dates can also be required depending on the commodity. Those are just a few examples of data elements that can be required. In order to not have shippers entering in manual data, an Item Master can augment the information from the order entry system and decrease the amount of manual data entry.

Multiple Box Hierarchy — Quite simply, this is the capability of putting a box in a box in a box (etc.). The first box may actually be a fiber board box, the second level may be putting those on pallets, and the third level may be putting those pallets in an ocean container. A good packing application will provide for these work flows and maintain the connections between the levels so that any item's location is known at any point in the shipping process.

Multiple Label and Documentation Events — This is related to the previous bullet. A packing application needs to create a variety of labels and documents. A good packing application will allow the selection of those labels and/or documents and their quantity on 'container complete' or 'pallet complete' or 'shipment complete.' Allowing this type of configuration as a setting based on either customers or commodities will allow for handling multiple work flows and allow the packing/shipping process to modify as needed when new customers, commodities or geographies are added.

API — Packing is an interactive process. Generally, an order is brought up on a screen and a warehouse employee is interacting with a screen to denote what items are go-

ing into a container. An Application Programming Interface (API) is often used when an application is 'black box' and there is no interaction with a user interface.

So why should a Packing Application need an API? Not all packing operations can be done in front of a PC. Remote tablets, RF devices and other mobile devices may need to be employed in the warehouse. At a minimum these devices need to be able to populate the compliant forms and labels and an API or some integration capability is required to facilitate that process.

Packing Tolerances — While expensive and regulated commodities need to have specific amounts of the items denoted on the documentation; some companies also ship inexpensive items or replacement parts. Often these items are in a bulk container in the warehouse and the time it would take to open the bulk packaging and count individual items is not cost effective. Therefore the items are shipped and fulfilled to a tolerance of the amount requested. For instance, 1600 specialty screws may be packed in pouches of five dozen pieces. Rather than open a pouch and put individual screws back on the shelf, the order will ship in the closest multiple of 60 that meets an agreed to tolerance for the order of 1500.

Multiple Work Flows — Although the packing application needs to support the complex data elements and be able to support myriad domestic and international documentation, some-times the shipping department is also processing simpler items. Take for instance an order of 100 card tables, where each will ship domestically as an individual container. The ability to highlight that entire order and 'fast pack' with one click of a mouse is a time saving work-flow.

That last point is important: make sure the software can handle your complex data elements, but not at the cost of burdening the simpler work flows. It would be like buying a lot of high end workout equipment for your home gym, but not having enough space to sit down and do a few sit-ups! ■

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