

CASE STUDY



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PET FOOD EXPERTS IMPROVES ORDER PICKING AND EMPLOYEE ENGAGEMENT WITH LYDIA VOICE

National distributor of pet foods and supplies ensures high levels of customer service and associate productivity with transition from paper to voice picking system from EPG.

Now in its third generation of ownership by the Baker family, Pet Food Experts has evolved from its start in 1936 as an aquarium and fish retailer to its current position as a national distributor of pet foods and supplies to independent pet stores. The Cumberland, Rhode Island-headquartered company currently operates six distribution centers (DCs) strategically located across the U.S. to ensure high-quality service to its customers.

Although the company had deployed an Infor warehouse management system (WMS) for inventory control and order management, its DCs still used paper-based picking to fill customer orders. By 2017, that process had become cumbersome as well as increasingly error

prone. Further, as Pet Food Experts' business continued to grow and expand to more than 13,000 stock keeping units (SKUs) — many in shared locations — and 6,000 customers, it was becoming difficult for associates to achieve the level of productivity needed to keep up with orders.

According to Pet Food Experts' COO, the paper-based picking process was highly complex. It also relied heavily on in-house dispatchers to plan and organize multiple, intricate order fulfillment and pallet building assignments based on truck routing. Deploying a different solution that improved workflows as well as modernized its fulfillment operations was a top objective.



CHALLENGE

- Lack of inventory visibility
- Short picks resulted in accuracy errors
- Co-mingled pick locations increased selection errors and reduced productivity
- Inefficient, paper-based picking process



SOLUTION

- Integration with Infor WMS enhanced inventory visibility with bi-directional line-item updates
- Modernized manual dispatch order assignment and selection process
- Reduced order fulfillment auditing labor costs



RESULTS

- Visibility and transparency of warehouse processes via real-time reporting
- Elimination of manual paper processes
- 38% productivity improvement
- 99.9% accuracy achieved
- 15% to 20% improved employee retention

“Not only do our order associates tell us they’re happier with the Lydia Voice system, the best indicator is when we’ve run a simulation scenario of a network failure that required a return to paper — and our folks hated it! That’s the best sign that our employees are engaged and Lydia Voice is the perfect tool.”

COO at Pet Food Experts

“Picking from paper manifest sheets was very inefficient and didn’t give us visibility into inventory availability,” he said. “We needed a new system that would give us greater efficiency, decrease the number of touches, and — more importantly — give us control while enabling us to see what was going on each and every step of the way. That’s where voice picking came in.”

ABOUT THE SOLUTION

Finding a digital picking solution was a priority. While wireless, hand held barcode scanners were considered, Pet Food Experts’ research found that voice-directed picking solutions offered a better user experience and faster, more accurate picking due to their hands-free format.

“With the new generation’s labor force, it had to be a digital tool that was easy to use, easy to be trained on, and able to get people engaged right away to help them do their jobs really, really well,” the COO explained.

The company selected Lydia Voice from EPG, a leading global provider of supply chain execution and voice software solutions. The solution was first piloted — and fully deployed at the company’s Cumberland, Rhode Island warehouse.

Interfacing with Pet Food Experts’ existing Infor WMS, Lydia Voice synchronizes and routes line-item information between the WMS and the voice system bi-directionally. This ensures inventory levels are updated in real-time and always visible to management.

The company chose EPG Cloud hosting, eliminating the need for in-house information technology (IT) support, servers, and other associated costs. This hosting decision also supported flexible deployment across all of Pet Food Experts’ facilities, which subsequently occurred in Washington State, Pennsylvania, Colorado, and California — the last two installations being managed during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Employees were outfitted with EPG’s Voxter voice device, a mobile device that connects to the associates’ choice of either a headset or a lightweight Lydia VoiceWear vest that integrates speakers and a microphone. Both enable associates to remain hands-free and eyes-free for picking.

THE RESULTS

The Lydia Voice system has met all of Pet Food Experts’ original objectives. Associates are picking 38% faster, thanks to audible picking directions verified by a spoken confirmation to ensure accuracy; a streamlined dispatch process that prioritizes work assignments to support truck routes; and voice-directed pallet building based on weight and size variables. Additionally, associate-specific analytics help managers determine which associates need additional training to improve their productivity, as well as supports incentive programs.

Order accuracy has risen to 99.9% because associates must verbally confirm a pick location by speaking a check digit prior to picking the SKU. Further, integrated analytics give managers greater visibility into the status of active and scheduled orders, as well as inventory availability.

Training of new hires — which previously took up to three weeks with the paper-based picking system — now takes no longer than a week. While many of Pet Food Experts’ new hires may not be native English speakers, it’s not a problem thanks to Lydia Voice’s deep neural network voice recognition solution. Lydia Voice automatically recognizes more than 50 different languages, and a multitude of unique dialects. This eliminates the need for voice-template training typically required of other voice systems.

Pet Food Experts further credits Lydia Voice with the company’s 15% to 20% improved retention rate across its DC network, noting that the solution has improved its workers’ experience.

ABOUT PET FOOD EXPERTS

- Wholesale distributor of over 120 brands of high quality dog, cat, and small animal food and supplies
- Supports over 5,300+ independent pet retailers in 38 states out of five distribution centers.
- Owns and operates five independent retail locations



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