

delivery

START A REVOLUTION!

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WILL RETURN



Automated will-call lifts the restraints of the traditional 9 to 5

By Robert Sherlock

Companies involved with small order logistics (defined as person-portable products and quantities, as well as documents) are now in a position to fundamentally change how they serve customers and operate their businesses. The application of automated access technologies can undo time and space constraints of long standing, allowing an unprecedented level of productivity and convenience for businesses, delivery carriers and customers. It may be possible to win customers and contracts on the basis of these benefits, lower your costs and reduce asset requirements in your business.

Beginning in the late 1980s, various companies have applied electronic lock controls and software interfaces to create automated drop-off, storage and will-call facilities that can be operated 24/7, without the need for on-site personnel. These automated will-call centers allow shipments to be deposited by delivery drivers or other users; hold the shipments securely short- or long-term; allow pick-up at the convenience of recipients; and document the handoffs. The physical spaces controlled can range from dock doors to vending-style slots. Related technologies can be found in the self-service electronic kiosks industry, including for postal and parcel shipping.

These automated access facilities can take a variety of form factors and be used in B2C and B2B applications. The leading technologies utilize web-enabled software interfaces and telemetry to provide remote control and status monitoring and extensive documentation of transactions. A wide range of facility users — company personnel, delivery drivers or end users — can be granted selective levels of access.

In business-to-consumer settings, the common applications are: dispersed will-call sites for receiving merchandise ordered over

the Internet or by phone/fax; on-premises will-call sites (for example, at multi-family residential complexes); and 24/7 pick-up and drop-off of clothes at dry cleaning and laundry establishments.

In business-to-business settings, the general applications are:

- 1 On Premises:** Controlled storage and dispensing of indirect materials and tools (for example, in industrial plants), as well as will-call sites for receiving merchandise ordered over the Internet or by phone/fax
- 2 Outbound Logistics:** Forward stocking points for critical service parts and specialized tools and dispersed will-call sites for receiving merchandise ordered over the Internet or the telephone
- 3 Reverse Logistics:** Return point for paperwork, products, defective parts or used "cores" being sent back for remanufacturing

Opportunities Abound

No longer is it necessary to have two parties in the same place, at the same time, to make a secure, documented handoff of documents or merchandise.

For sellers, shippers and delivery fleets: Retail and B2B merchandise establishments that are not normally open 24/7 can offer extended will-call and drop-off hours to their customers. It allows companies that utilize small shipment delivery fleets within a metropolitan area to aggregate many stops into a handful. And companies can cut the risk they now run of theft or weather damage if deliveries are dropped at unattended residences or work sites.

For receivers: Companies with mobile personnel, such as service technicians and contractors, can realize major productivity benefits by reducing drive time and wait time currently involved in receiving shipments of parts and components or in sending back paperwork, defectives and excess parts. Residents of frequently unattended households can experience flexible control over the time and place of receiving, while avoiding risks of theft and weather damage to their merchandise.

Finding Beneficial Applications

Players involved in small shipment logistics — whether parcel or greater-than-parcel merchandise, paperwork, etc. — must ask

themselves: How might our business change in beneficial ways if we adopt automated-access technologies into our business model?

As companies assess the potential business benefits of adopting automated will-call and drop-off systems, the following questions may be helpful in determining suitability and developing requirements for a solution:

- What products or other objects make up your physical shipments or hand-offs? Any special characteristics to plan for (temperature sensitivity, for example)?
- For what portion(s) of the journey between production and end use is your company responsible?
- How important is documentation of handoffs? How about visibility into where the shipment is at any given time?
- Who are the end users? What do end users do with the products or paperwork they receive? That they send? Do they arrive by vehicle or on foot?
- Is the person who typically receives small shipments the same person who will use the contents of the shipment? How about for reverse shipments — does the end user hand off the part to someone else to make the reverse shipment?
- How important is it for the end user to be in full, last-minute control over the time and place of pickup and drop-off?
- What are the consequences of not receiving their shipments at the time and place that they desire?
- During what days of the week and hours of day or night do end users desire to receive shipments? Send back reverse shipments of products, parts or paperwork?

- Are there one or more intermediate receivers between the end user and your company? Who?
- How important is speeding up the time of receipt? The time of drop-off? Time of completing the reverse logistics trip?
- Do end users stay in one place during the course of their workdays, or do they move among buildings or from place to place (such as town to town)?
- Do you or your customers operate will-call counters? How far (distance and drive time) are your will-call facilities from end user travel routes between job sites, home, etc.?
- What does it cost annually to operate your outbound and reverse logistics, counting personnel, facilities and out-of-pocket expenses? What's the value of the assets you employ in handling small shipment logistics?
- What's the economic value to your customers of a better mode of receiving or reverse shipping?

With automated will-call technologies, it is no longer necessary to get two people in the same place at the same time to make a secure, documented handoff of a small shipment. How can that change your ability to serve your customers profitably?

Robert Sherlock is a principal with The ProAction Group in Chicago, a hands-on consulting firm serving distribution, logistics and manufacturing clients. Bob can be reached at rsherlock@proactiongroup.com or visit www.proactiongroup.com/articles/willcall.htm. ■

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