

8 Order Picking Secrets

By Art Avery

While it is possible to sabotage any order picking system, the following 8 points should get you as close as humanly possible to perfect order picking.

Automatically verify everything

Design your order picking system to double-verify every step of the picking process. People will make mistakes – that is human nature. But double (or even triple) checking will catch the mistakes – preferably while the picker is still in front of the pick slot, where correction will cost you almost nothing. A system that requires scanning of slot ID bar code labels and product UPC codes, along with a blind entry of the quantity picked, will guarantee the right pick is made.

Touch items once

Touch each piece of product exactly ONCE. The pick process should allow enough verified accuracy that further repacking, QC checking, or shipping checking, is NOT required. A pick unit should go into the outbound truck touched only by the original picker's hands.

Minimize walking

Minimize selector walking by:

Picking from both sides of the aisle, using small pick facings.

Placing slow-moving items on side aisles which are entered only when needed.

Picking many smaller orders in one trip (batch picking.)

100% product availability

Design your replenishment system to insure a selector never has to face an empty pick slot waiting for replenishment, and that orders never need to be segregated, awaiting missing items before shipping.

Ideally, pick lists should contain only items KNOWN to actually be in stock at the pick slot. It is unproductive to have pickers waste precious time correcting inventory system shortcomings.

Use ABC item analysis

If 10% of your items can completely satisfy 50% of your orders (typically true), then I call these "A" items. You can set up a short pick line comprised of only these "A" items, and immediately half of your orders require walking through only 10% of the pick area. Then, find another 20% of your items that will satisfy an additional 30% of orders, and slot them as branches off the short pick line.

Almost 80% of your orders will now require travel passing in front of only 15-20% of your total pick slots!

Stop pick and pass line picking

"Pass-along" picking (passing totes along a conveyor line from picker to picker), slows all orders to the speed of the slowest picker, or, to the capacity of the busiest pick station. Pick rates of the better pickers can often be increased by 30% to 200%, just by switching from conveyor picking to individual cart picks.

Invest in training and quality circles

No matter how well designed your picking system WAS, changing customer requirements will undermine its original excellence. Your pickers and supervisors are your first line of defence against "creeping obsolescence." An investment in productivity and accuracy improvement (Total Quality), and management supported quality circles that meet regularly to identify problems and propose solutions, will pay big dividends in continuous improvement of even an already excellent system.

Walk your talk

In my experience, the least costly, most effective way to improve your distribution system is through direct, continuous and enthusiastic top and middle management support, of the workers' striving for the highest level of picking accuracy and efficiency. Workers sense immediately, if management is only giving "lip service" to their commitment to excellence. Caring is contagious.

Art's 34 years of distribution experiences have taken many directions, providing a broad base of managerial, operational, technical, and strategic knowledge that now enables him to assist any distribution operation from very small to very large - to improve, expand, streamline or build, consolidate, design or move into new facilities.