



SUMMARY



Customer

Saddle Creek Logistics Services
Lakeland, FL

Industry

3rd Party Logistics (3PL)

Challenge

Modernize warehouses on an ongoing basis to keep up with consumers' continually growing buying choices and demand for rapid order fulfillment and receipt

Solution

- TC8000 Touch Computer
- ET50 Tablet (Vehicle Mounted)
- TC52 Touch Computer
- MC9300 Mobile Computer
- DS3600ER Ultra-Rugged Scanner
- DS9908-R Scanner
- ZT610 Industrial Series Printer

Results

- Increased volumes for receiving, put-away, inventory, picking and shipping, even with expanding product SKU counts
- Stayed competitive and increased service volume without increasing full-time headcount
- Reduced warehouse associates' training time, including temporary associates hired during peak demand seasons
- Enabled retail business customers to offer consumers more buying choices
- Better supported evolving customer needs through continued innovation within supply-chain operations

Saddle Creek Logistics Raises Fulfillment Accuracy and Efficiency via Phased Warehouse Modernization

Periodic technology upgrades help customers offer more buying choices

Since its founding in 1966, Saddle Creek Logistics Services, an omnichannel supply-chain solutions and third-party logistics services (3PL) provider, has enhanced the product selection and availability its retail customers can offer consumers. In today's 'Now Economy,' where consumers have unprecedented access to buying information and goods with a mouse click or screen tap, they've come to expect instant, 24/7 shopping gratification. To help customers meet that expectation, supply-chain companies like Saddle Creek must evolve to keep up.

In response, Saddle Creek has undertaken several phases of warehouse technology modernization to continually boost fulfillment accuracy and speed—and it's working.

Saddle Creek's 1.5 million-square-foot Fort Worth, TX warehousing and 3PL services facility is part of a nationwide network of 46 facilities strategically located in 16 states to enable the company to deliver goods to most of the U.S. population in two days or less. Modernization initiatives at Fort Worth and its other facilities enable the company to follow through on that commitment amid steadily growing order volume, and at existing full-time staffing levels.

Bobby Hays, Saddle Creek's vice president of distribution based in Fort Worth, notes that the company has made numerous technology upgrades to incrementally boost order-fulfillment accuracy and efficiency. The upgrades, starting with barcode scanning, have made all the difference.

“As our business grows, Zebra provides us with technology solutions that grow and evolve with us.”

Tony Hollis, director of technology and innovation, Saddle Creek Logistics Services



Hays, a supply-chain logistics industry veteran of more than 30 years, recalls that the company’s goods-tracking processes were completely manual and used paper records in the pre-scanning era. “We used stickers to identify products and their locations,” he says. “Consumers’ choices were limited to one product, one brand and one size.”

Paper-to-Pixels Product Tracking

Replacing paper-based product-tracking records with barcode scanning in the early 2000s was Saddle Creek’s first phase of technology-driven warehouse modernization. “Our ability to scan and ensure order accuracy really proliferated SKU counts in the warehouse and our customers’ offerings,” Hays says. “Today, in apparel, for instance, they’re able to offer a different cut, a different style, a different color and even a different shade of color in some cases.”

For Hays and Saddle Creek, the goal of modernization has been managing that higher SKU count by making many processes more efficient. Doing that requires the right tools.

Different Form Factors, Same Efficiency Goal

Saddle Creek’s second, and current, modernization phase is adopting new mobile computing and scanning device form factors that are purpose-built for warehouse work. The goal is increasing warehouse associates’ productivity wherever possible to keep up with burgeoning order volume. It’s why Saddle Creek uses more than 1,500 Zebra® mobile computers, tablets and scanners for workflows from receiving to shipping.

“Technology is a tremendous enabler and a critical part of how we support our customers’ businesses,” says Tony Hollis, Saddle Creek’s director of technology and innovation, also based in Fort Worth. The best way Saddle Creek can support its customers is to continually wring inefficiencies out of its inbound and outbound operations. Multiple form factors are making that possible.

Ultra-rugged combination keypad/touch-screen handheld mobile computers enhance the efficiency of receiving, put-away, inventory and shipping processes that incorporate barcode scanning. The devices can scan barcodes as far away as 70 feet. It takes a lot less time to check item inventory on a high shelf from the floor than lowering its pallet prior to scanning, for example.

Lupe Ochoa, Saddle Creek's inventory control lead in Fort Worth, scans a barcode on a package, determines its correct warehouse location and checks product quantities at that location using a Zebra touch computer with the appearance of a ruggedized smartphone. She also prints barcode labels for inventory remotely using a mobile computer when necessary. "A handheld device makes it easier for me to print labels," she says. "I've worked here for almost two years. I have never printed an inaccurate barcode with a Zebra printer."

Saddle Creek also pairs rugged tablet computers with ultra-rugged extended-range scanners and mounting the solution on forklifts. The solution maintains efficiency when it's necessary to use a forklift in receiving, picking, inventory and shipping tasks. "Zebra rugged tablets have a nice balance of usability, performance and maintainability," Hollis says. "They're easy for associates to use and if we need to update or repair them, we can easily take them out of their mounts and temporarily replace them with other units."

Order picking, arguably the most repetitive scan-intensive task in any warehouse, offers opportunities to scale efficiency gains. Saddle Creek's warehouse associates gain efficiencies with touch computers that are ergonomically designed to reduce associates' wrist motion when they view the screen while picking and filling custom orders. The screens stay vertical during scans and fractions of a second add up for associates filling hundreds of orders during a shift. Reduced wrist flexing also keeps them comfortable and productive.

Associates who fill orders in pick-to-light processes use proximity scanners for hands-free scanning—drastically boosting efficiency. The combination of those scanners and industrial printers enables associates to quickly scan item barcodes, verify orders and print shipping labels.

In many cases, Saddle Creek adopts a form factor for one task and finds that it can add efficiency to others. That versatility is a good example of the unique value Saddle Creek gains from its partnership with Zebra. "One of the benefits of working with Zebra is that its devices have extended functionality," Hollis says. "As our business grows and evolves, we can take advantage of that functionality."

In a business that sees seasonal activity spikes, training efficiency matters, too. Adopting the touch computers and rugged tablets, which have familiar Android™ touch-screen user interfaces, pays off. "The Android user interfaces are intuitive and enable us to get temporary associates trained very quickly so we can process higher seasonal volumes," Hays says. Also, these devices have easily integrated with the company's cloud-based Softeon warehouse management system (WMS). They have given IT an efficiency increase, too.



Further Automating Workflows

Successful warehouse modernization requires foresight and technology partners with a solid understanding of customers' future needs as well as potential technology solutions. For Saddle Creek, the goal of offering its customers the ability to give consumers virtually anything they want, whenever they want, won't change. The productivity leaps it has gained in key warehouse workflows will continue, with Zebra's support.

"When we're looking for new solutions, Zebra helps us by looking into the future, looking at solutions that can add value to our operations," Hollis says. "As our business grows, Zebra provides us with technology solutions that grow and evolve with us."

With e-commerce driving even greater order volume, Saddle Creek's leadership is looking at further upgrades to keep up. The company will undertake a third modernization phase—partial automation of some workflows with robotics—in the coming years. For instance, using robots to travel between picking and packing areas will free associates to spend more time picking items for order fulfillment and less time walking.

"Robots will work side by side with our associates, who will continue to use Zebra scanning devices," Hollis says. "I'm also confident that Zebra will help us meet future challenges like these through its ongoing product development efforts."



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