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5 Ways to Stay on Top of Holiday Orders

BY SAMANTHA DRAKE | December 13, 2013 | [Post Comment](#) | [Clip it](#)

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The holiday shopping season is a crucial time for any retailer, much less a small one. Major players like Amazon and Toys “R” Us hire seasonal armies of up to 70,000 temporary workers to handle their pre- and post-holiday shipping needs but small businesses just don’t have those kinds of resources to deal with an influx of orders.



Image credit: smallbiztrends.com

This year poses even more challenges than usual because there are six fewer shopping days between Thanksgiving and Christmas.

“Six less sales days is kind of scary for some retailers,” acknowledges Robert Gilbreath, vice president of marketing at ShipStation.com in Austin, Texas. “We have to do the same amount of business in a shorter time.” Adding to the shopping crunch, Thanksgiving coincided with the start of Hanukah this year, he notes.

Adding to the challenges, the week between Christmas and New Year’s Day “has become a season in itself” when people redeem gift cards received as presents, points out Curt Barry, chief executive officer and founder of operations and fulfillment consultant F. Curtis Barry & Co. in Richmond, Va.

In short, the holiday shopping season has become a marathon, not a sprint, for retailers. For small retailers, any strategies that help them keep up with holiday orders while staying within modest shipping budgets is a gift.

Here are five tips to help small businesses boost order fulfillment efficiency and save money so they can survive and thrive through the end of the year and beyond:

1. Conduct fulfillment process “fire drills.” Gilbreath recommends getting out a stopwatch to see how long it takes to complete various tasks, such as packing a box. Timing the fulfillment process also helps identify areas that aren’t running smoothly, he notes. In addition, be sure the processes are thoroughly and accurately documented in the event workers need to be shifted around or new people are brought in to help, says Gilbreath.

2. Assess the physical fulfillment space. Take a look at the layout of the space being used to fill orders and pack for shipping, says Barry. Can products be stored differently or equipment used more efficiently? Barry advises making sure the most popular products are close by and in ready supply to reduce lost time. Take packers’ needs into consideration by making sure they have enough space to work on and don’t have to walk too far to get products or packing

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supplies, he says. Also, assess how packing and shipping can be made more comfortable for workers, with adjustable-height tables and support mats for workers to stand on, says Barry.

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3. Consider software to coordinate the processes.

Shipping software programs, such as [ProShip](#), based in Brookfield, Wis., and [Endicia](#), in Palo Alto, Calif. can be tailored to meet individual small businesses needs and make shipping functions more efficient. ShipStation's web-based programs, for example, lets small businesses manage shipments using multiple carriers from one interface and generates labels and packing slips. ShipStation allows for month-to-month subscriptions so small business clients pay for extra support only when they need it, says Gilbreath.

ShipStation's pricing ranges from \$25 for 500 shipments per month from one online marketplace platform to \$145 for unlimited shipping per month from multiple platforms. The monthly price includes the printing of labels and packing slips, as well as administrative functions such as order status and tracking.

4. Talk to your carrier. Don't assume you already know everything your carriers can do, advises Gilbreath. If you ask, your carrier may have some flexibility around pick-up times, which can be a boon during high-volume periods such as the holidays, he says. Big shippers such as [UPS](#) and [Federal Express](#) provide resources specifically designed to help small businesses. In some cases, carriers can connect businesses with logistics experts or offer tools to make packing and shipping more efficient.

5. Get creative to stay competitive. Test new, developing services that might allow you to offer same-day, on-demand shipping in certain markets. [Crowdshipping](#), for instance, is a web-based method of delivery that connects packages needing transport with local lay and professional couriers locally, regionally, and even nationally. Some examples include [Deliv](#), based in Palo Alto, Calif. and [Zipments](#) based in New York.

Crowdshipping is an emerging method and not every new service is currently available in every market. However, where services are available, crowdshipping can allow small businesses like yours to offer demand shipping at an affordable price, giving you a competitive advantage, says Kevin Mehrabi, the chief executive officer and founder of [Runner](#), a crowdshipping service in Los Angeles. This method can make sense for perishable items that need to be delivered the same day, large or awkward-sized items that would be costly to pack and ship, and even less expensive items that wouldn't be worth shipping via a standard carrier, he says.



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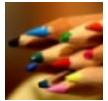
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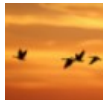


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