B2B RETURNS:

Finding Value and Opportunity in a Well-Managed Returns Process

We deliver Canada

Introduction

A funny thing has happened in the world of business-to-business (B2B) commerce in recent years: transactions that traditionally were marked by low levels of personal interaction and rigid confines of purchase orders and commercial invoices have started to look more and more like individual-focused business-to-consumer (B2C) interactions. From a marked increase in B2B eCommerce to the rise of mobile transactions and use of social media, today's business transactions are taking on a new look that increasingly resembles B2C interactions.

One area where this is especially true is with product returns. Businesses that sell directly to consumers are increasingly aware that an estimated 8.6 percent of sales will come back in the form of returns – 80 percent of which will not be damaged or in any way defective. That number increases dramatically for eCommerce purchases. Businesses are realizing the potential windfall that could materialize from a well-managed returns policy, both in terms of recapturing revenue and in generating good will among consumers, and prioritizing the need for a highly functioning returns policy.

So too is the case for B2B returns. Although B2B sales transactions are much more voluminous than B2C transactions, the incidence of returns tends to be less frequent. In general, B2B returns tend to fall into one of the following distinct categories:

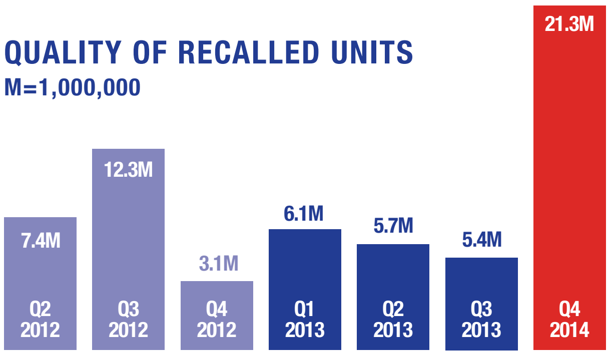
- Product Recalls
- Product Defects
- Warranty Returns
- Parts
- Unsold/Obsolete Merchandise
- End-of-Life Returns

Businesses that sell directly to consumers tend to prioritize returns policies in terms of ease and flexibility for the consumer, with great emphasis placed on making the returns experience a positive experience. And it's no wonder, with 85 percent of consumers responding in a recent survey that they would not return to a retailer with an inconvenient returns policy.

For B2B transactions, however, the emphasis is on critical timing and recapturing revenue. A manufacturer that returns a shipment of defective parts, for example, faces an idle assembly line until a new supply of parts arrives. This is especially true for industries such as the automotive aftermarket, which relies on a just-in-time inventory model and maintains little to no backup supplies. When it comes to B2B returns, time really is money.

And when it comes to managing a product recall, time is truly of the essence, particularly if a potential health or safety risk is involved. Recent data compiled by Stericycle, Inc. found that rates of recalls are surging at an alarming rate. During the fourth quarter of 2013, more than 21.3 million units of products were recalled in the United States, a 292 percent increase over the previous quarter. Products recalled ranged from pharmaceuticals to medical devices to children's toys and furniture to bicycles, flashlights, and hooded jackets.

QUALITY OF RECALLED UNITS
M=1,000,000



Analysis by Stericycle found that the quantity of recalled units during Q4 2013 was a 292 percent increase from the prior quarter.
Source: The Recall Sprawl

It seems that no industry is immune to the potential of a product recall, especially at a time when manufacturers face increased regulatory oversight by a record number of agencies. In addition to regulatory mandates from the U.S. Food and Drug Administration, the Consumer Product Safety Commission, the U.S. Department of Agriculture, and a patchwork of state commissions, manufacturers must also contend with international standards. A recent SupplyChainBrain magazine article included a laundry list of just some of the international product-safety regulatory codes: the European Commission's Registration, Evaluation, Authorization, and Restriction of Chemicals (REACH) regulation; Europe's Restriction of Hazardous Substances (RoHS) directive; California's proposition on environmental health hazards; and strict product standards in the U.K. and China, to name a few.

But B2B returns have come to encapsulate much more than the process of recapturing goods in a reverse supply chain. Once shipments have moved back through their supply chain, the question becomes, "What now?" It used to be that manufacturers would routinely dispose of returned products and write off the costs as a loss. While products recalled for health or safety reasons must be destroyed and may never reenter the supply the chain, there are opportunities for nondefective returns. Today, businesses are realizing there can be value in that pile of returned merchandise – and lots of it! Secondary markets – outlet stores, overstock stores and websites, eBay, dollar stores, and auctions – are among the venues available for businesses to sell returned merchandise that either is not defective or can be refurbished and returned to market.

With so much at stake, businesses are increasingly reliant on trusted and proven relationships with logistics partners to manage their B2B returns. A business needs to partner with a company that understands its business objectives and is committed to helping it reach and even exceed its goals. With regard to returns management, a qualified provider will break down a business's current operations and processes, and then customize a solution to fit the business's precise needs. This is especially true when extenuating circumstances, a border crossing, for example, are involved. A business doesn't want to find out in the eleventh hour that the logistics company it thought had the capacity to handle returns is not up to the job.

The following discussion will provide an in-depth review of the B2B returns category, including an overview of problems many business face in addressing their returns and factors to consider when looking for the most qualified logistics provider to manage this critical process.

B2B Transactions – What's Being Returned?

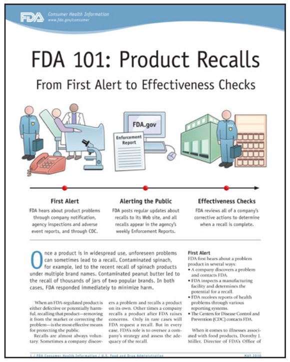
When an individual returns a toaster to the store and says, "I didn't like it," the return is usually chalked up to personal preference and no special insight is gleaned from the transaction. But when many retailers and distributors report back to the manufacturer with pallets of unsold merchandise, a wise manufacturer will discern that something about the product is making it unattractive to consumers. This insight will help the manufacturer to take steps necessary – focus group, price analysis, design investigation – to try and figure out how the product could be made more desirable.

This is the nature of B2B returns. They may not be as frequent as consumer returns, which show up randomly and for all sorts of reasons. Instead, B2B returns tend to be arranged events – often time critical – and usually involve large quantities. In general, B2B returns fall into one of the following categories:

Product Recalls

Last year there were more than 2,360 product recalls in the United States, which, according to USA Today, amounted to roughly 6.5 new recalls each day. Indianapolis-based Stericycle, which specializes in helping companies manage product recalls, reports that during the fourth quarter of 2013 the total number of recalled products exceeded 21.3 million – a 292 percent increase from the previous year. Industries most prone to product recalls include pharmaceuticals, medical devices, food, consumer products, and automobiles. Reasons for recalls vary.

Within the consumer products category, for example, top causes included: structural collapse, entrapment/strangulation, and laceration.


FDA 101: Product Recalls

From First Alert to Effectiveness Checks

First Alert

Alerting the Public

Effectiveness Checks

The Food and Drug Administration is a principal regulatory agency in mandating product recalls, along with the U.S. Consumer Product Safety Commission, the U.S. Department of Agriculture, and many other federal, state, and local regulatory boards. Source: Fda.gov

Several reasons are behind the surge in recalls, but top culprits include increased regulatory oversight, better testing procedures, and the emergence of social media as a platform for consumers to quickly communicate about concerns and problems.

While most businesses may never experience a product recall, all must be ready to contend with the possibility, however remote it may seem. Businesses should have in place a detailed "recall manual," which details the roles and responsibilities of every functional area during a recall. Integral, of course, will be the actual processes of (a) stopping any additional shipments from going out; (b) implementing a reverse supply chain in order to collect product that has already been shipped and to trace products as far down the chain as possible; (c) storing or disposing of affected products; and (d) providing a remedy to affected businesses and consumers.

A recent legal analysis in Inc. magazine offered the following advice: "Of course you'll have to quarantine the product within your facilities and stop shipment, but you'll also have to contact distributors and retailers to take the product off the shelves. Your ability to trace the product to each individual consumer may also be limited. For example, if you're recalling a food product sold at a grocery store, you may be able to trace the product to the store itself, but not to who bought it.... After gathering all those unsafe products, you still have to figure out what to do with them, and your customers." The article quoted Dave Wix, of the Deerfield, Illinois, Wix Law Group, which specializes in product recall consulting: "We've initiated the recall, but now what's going to be done with the products" Wix asks. "Are they sent back to the company to be reworked, or is a different product provided to the consumer? Do they get a refund? Certainly there needs to be a clear remedy."

Another logistical factor that has taken hold in recent years is "recall sprawl," which refers to the "increased severity and complexity" of recalls due to "the increasingly global business focus of manufacturers in just about every market tier." Global businesses that sell a defective product in the U.S. will have to worry about retrieving that same defective product from countries across the globe. A March 2014 Forbes article noted that "manufacturers, even larger ones, are just not set up to manage the logistics of recall sprawl – certainly not the multijurisdictional compliance requirements that variously govern recalls in multiple countries. Meanwhile, the massive ramp-ups to achieve required levels of surge capacity constitute potentially devastating business interruptions."

Not surprisingly, the number one recommendation for handling the logistics of a product recall – planning and preparedness. No business hopes for a product recall, but a smart business plans for one. Work with your logistics provider to ensure that you have considered all necessary components:

- Will you have the necessary capacity to remove recalled products from store shelves and distributors?
- How will recall be communicated to key stakeholders?
- How will product be collected?
- Where will recalled products be warehoused?
- Will products be repaired and reshipped?

Warranty Returns

Products returned while still under warranty have been described by at least one supply chain manager as a "huge pain point." This particular manager was referring to a recent trend in which retailers are starting to offer warranties at point of sale, meaning that a single product may be covered by multiple warranties. Yet timely and accurate processing of warranty claims is a critical indicator of company performance. December 2012 research by Aberdeen found that of businesses considered to be "leaders," 82 percent processed warranty claims within an "accepted" timeline and were able to retain 86 percent of customers. But businesses deemed to be "followers" only met warranty expectations 30 percent of the time and saw a customer retention rate of 42 percent.

OEMs are responsible for repairs to a defective product during a warranty period. But a key issue is determining eligibility. A retailer and manufacturer would ideally collaborate to determine if a returned product is still covered by warranty, a process that has been dramatically improved as technology has increasingly become a returns management problem solver.

Once a warranty claim has been validated, time is of the essence. A business may opt to follow a "standard" returns process in which a defective product must be returned prior to shipment of a replacement. Or an "advanced" warranty may be in place, where a replacement is shipped prior to return of a customer's faulty device.

Returned products still under warranty are usually tested, and all products found to be "No Fault Found" are cleaned and reintroduced to the supply chain. Products that are defective, depending on the scope of the defect, may be sent to a repair center for refurbishment. Once a returned product is deemed eligible for sale on a secondary market, a logistics provider will perform all necessary kiting, packaging, and labeling functions.

A new trend in warranty servicing at the B2B level is to offer "mobile repair service." RSI Repair Services Inc., the sole authorized North American service provider for Samsung, now offers trained service technicians who will travel to a business to perform necessary repairs. Not only does this provide a business with the convenience of not having to package and ship a faulty machine but it allows Samsung/RSI Repair to avoid having to warehouse an extensive inventory of equipment awaiting repair.

> "It is estimated that managing 'return and repair' processes alone contribute to at least 10% of overall supply chain costs. Ineffective reverse supply chain processes compound this cost and can reduce an organization's profit by approximately 30%."

Source: Reverse Logistics Magazine

Defective Returns

While it has been documented that defective products account for roughly 20 percent of all returns, at the B2B level, any defective product can have a debilitating effect. "Just in time" assembly lines, such as that espoused by Toyota, have been idle while forced to wait until a shipment of defective parts can be replaced. A manufacturer should maintain an ample inventory of spare and replacement parts to ensure that defective products can quickly be processed. Managing the repair process has traditionally been the weak link for many businesses. In fact, a report by the Reverse Logistics Association found that "managing the 'return and repair' processes account for 10 percent of overall supply chain costs. But ineffective processes can compound this cost and reduce profit by as much as 30 percent. Businesses are rectifying this problem by outsourcing their repairs or contracting with repair centers.

Excess Inventory/Obsolete Returns

This type of return refers to unsold seasonal merchandise or products that have been replaced by newer models or have been discontinued. Unsold merchandise can generally be moved directly into a secondary market, such as an outlet or overstock store, where a portion of value can be recaptured.

Time is of the essence when it comes to moving certain inventories, including computer hardware and appliances where newer models are regularly introduced, rendering older models obsolete and often unsupported. Thus it is helpful to develop a logistics plan that requires a minimal number of touches to transport time-sensitive inventory to the second market.

In a 2010 interview at the annual CSCMP conference, Tim Konrad of GENCO supply chain solutions stressed the economic importance of adding a product back into the market as quickly as possible. As an example, he noted that cell phones lose an average of one percent of value per week. Konrad also cited instances in which retailers and logistics companies conduct product testing, remarketing, and liquidation right at the retailer's returns center rather than transporting back to the manufacturer. By eliminating this step, products travel directly to the secondary market.

Parts

According to Reverse Logistics experts Greve-Davis, companies that conduct high levels of field repairs can expect to have 16 percent of all parts returned. Of that amount, approximately 25 percent can be inspected, repaired, repackaged, and returned to circulation for future use. Manufacturers have a strong interest in finding ways to manage the balance between not maintaining too high an inventory of parts without risking a shortfall. "Providing a way to return unused, reclaimed, overstocked, or defective parts streamlines the repair process and minimizes the investment by both manufacturers and field service companies," Greve-Davis wrote in a white paper.

End-of-Life Returns

Automobiles and consumer electronics, including computer hardware, printers, televisions, and mobile devices, comprise the top categories of End-of-Life (EOL) products. End-of-life products generally fall into one of three categories:

- No longer operating and need to be disposed of
- Still operational and eligible for resale
- Option for parts/components to be salvaged for reuse/resale

It wasn't that long ago that a product deemed to be at the end of its life was considered to be of no value and disposed of entirely. Now businesses are realizing the value of "creative thinking" when it comes to looking for ways to capture value from parts and components. Jeff Robe, director of marketing for the Reverse Logistics Association, said in a recent Inbound Logistics article: "Reverse logistics addresses questions including: At a product's end of life, can some components be salvaged and reused? Can the materials be ground up, recycled, and made into additional parts?" That same article cited the success of electronics company Cisco in "revamping its reverse logistics processes from a cost center to a profit source." According to the article, Cisco took what had been an $8 million loss and, by incorporating processes for capturing revenue in secondary markets, turned that loss into a $147 million source of new revenue.

Not surprisingly, disposal of end-of-life products has become a major environmental issue among manufacturers and countries. Disposal of EOL products requires strict adherence with regulatory requirements, which can vary widely based on product type and components. In Europe, for example, the Waste Electrical and Electronic Equipment Directive holds electronic equipment manufacturers and appliance manufacturers accountable for end-of-life disposal of their products – including refrigerators, computers, televisions, and mobile phones. Although not as broad in scope, similar "cradle-to-grave" types of mandates are beginning to take effect in the United States, including in Illinois, where electronics manufacturers are required to meet certain recycling goals.

Authors Mark Elliot and Jonathon Write wrote about the need for manufacturers to embrace their recycling responsibilities in The Future Direction of the Supply Chain: Mastering Reverse Logistics, "For both manufacturers and retailers, reverse logistics and recycling are outside of what realistically can be considered their core areas of competence. Even if the skills could be recruited or acquired, issues around practicality remain."

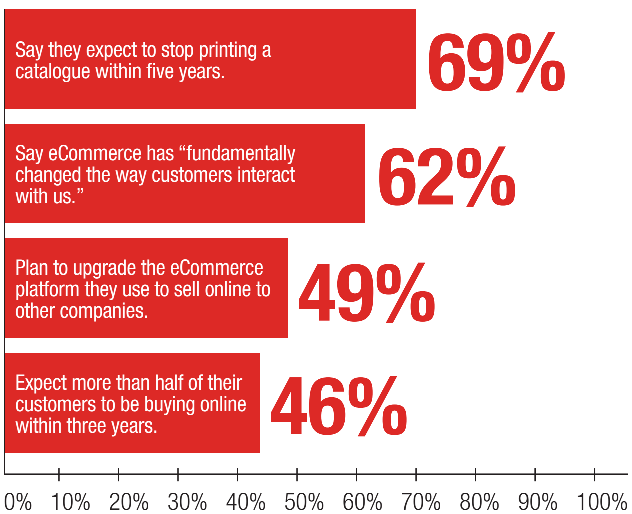
Instead, most manufacturers choose to outsource their end-of-life goods disposal. End-of-life disposal has been a growing service among logistics companies, but due diligence is in order to make sure a business's specific needs can be met. If a product contains hazardous materials, for example, a logistics provider must have complete knowledge about what components can and cannot be recovered and reused. Similarly, not every company is equipped to manage an extensive asset recovery program or to launch a Cisco type endeavor to take advantage of secondary market opportunities.

The Changing Face of B2B Sales – and Returns

As B2B businesses try to understand and manage their flow of returns, it's important to realize that the way in which B2B transactions take place is changing. Just as online sales and omnichannel retailing have changed the nature of B2C commerce, so too has the B2B universe been transformed. In fact, in terms of dollar amounts, B2B eCommerce purchases are more than twice the amount of B2C purchases. U.S. B2B online sales were $559 billion during 2013, versus B2C sales of $252 billion

THE CHANGING FACE OF B2B TRANSACTIONS – B2B ECOMMERCE NOW TOPS $559 BILLION

Survey of B2B eCommerce Executives



Source: Forrester Research and Internet Retailer

The reality that the B2B eCommerce market is twice the size of the B2C market is causing many businesses to retool their B2B marketing and "outreach" efforts, with many companies redesigning their websites and mobile outreach to provide B2B shoppers with retail experiences that more closely resemble B2C transactions.

So too is eCommerce changing the face of B2B product returns. A recent article in Forbes discussed how managers who place B2B orders online expect the same high quality service they receive when they shop for themselves. This extends to expectations that B2B returns will be easy and hassle free.

Another impact the rise of eCommerce is having is increased competition for B2B sales. As the Forbes article points out, Internet giants including Amazon and Alibaba have made inroads into the B2B world, meaning that "businesses have no time to spare when it comes to developing and improving the B2B commerce experience they deliver to their customers."

Maximizing Efficiency and Finding Revenue

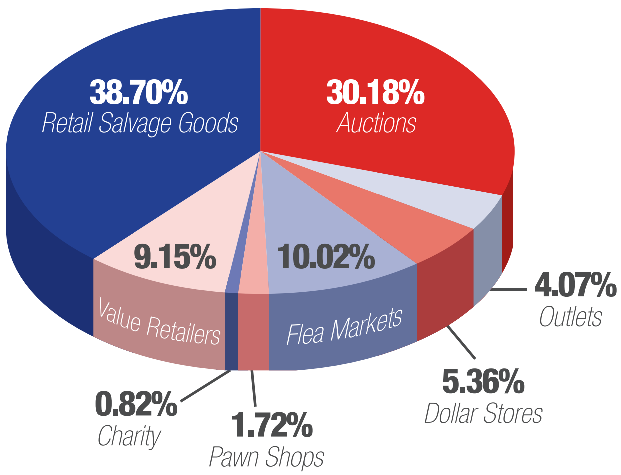
A B2B manager who looks out and sees a warehouse full of returns can sometimes have a hard time realizing that within those boxes and pallets could be opportunity and revenue! This is the nut of the revolution taking place with returns management. No longer are returns an unavoidable drain on a business's bottom line or an automatic profit loss. Instead, secondary markets now make it possible for businesses to recapture value from their returns. And businesses are recognizing the strong opportunity to showcase their customer service and bolster their reputations. As we saw above, the rise of eCommerce has increased competition for B2B dollars, which means a smart business will do everything it can to facilitate the returns process.

Secondary Markets

The explosive growth of secondary markets has enabled many businesses to recoup lost revenue – and even turn a profit – from product returns. Goods that were previously written off as a cost of doing business are now being refurbished, repackaged, and resold. Secondary market venues include outlets, discount stores, overstock websites, auctions, and flea markets. Reverse logistics consultants Greve-Davis estimate that the value of the secondary market accounts for 2.28 percent of total U.S. gross domestic product. And analysis by Accenture consultants of the consumer electronics secondary market found that many manufacturers and large retailers are approaching their secondary market customers with the same "zeal" as they do their brick-and-mortar customers.

In some instances, retailers are moving liquidation in-house so that products can move directly to a secondary market, thus streamlining the process and getting products back on the shelves sooner.

SECONDARY MARKET IS 2.28% OF GDP



Reverse Logistics experts Greve-Davis report that total Secondary Market sales account for 2.28% of the U.S. GDP. The secondary market is broken down into several components, as outlined above. Source: Greve-Davis

Also important to note is the success many manufacturers are having in remarketing unsold goods in foreign markets. Greve-Davis reports that as much as 40 percent of unsold U.S. goods are subsequently exported. A line of winter coats that does not sell in the U.S., for example, can be shipped to South America just in time for that region's winter selling season.

Understanding Your Returns

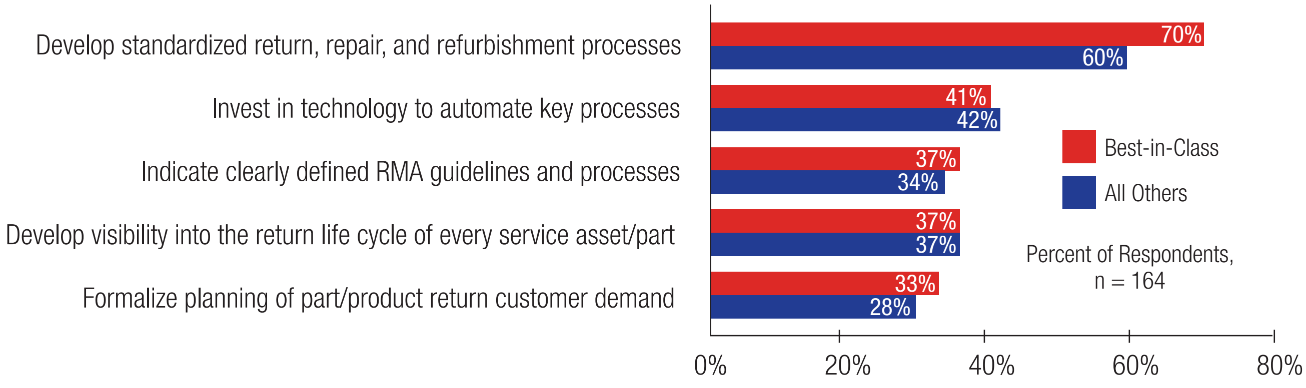
Businesses that see a spike in returns of a particular product can capture valuable information in order to address what may be a design flaw or product characteristic that is a turnoff to customers. Is a new piece of machinery or appliance too hard to operate? Are the instructions too complicated? Or maybe a style of boots isn't selling because the cut is too narrow. There can be a million reasons why products are returned, but rather than assume those reasons are outliers, a manufacturer would be wise to pay attention and possibly identify product improvements.

Reputation Enhancement

Many manufacturers have seen their reputations enhanced – or destroyed – based on how they handled a product recall. Researchers at Georgia Institute of Technology and the University of Manitoba studied more than 500 toy recalls between 1988 and 2007 looking for "best practices." Among their findings: "Effective recovery from a product recall begins with the way in which the company announces the recall. The firm should engage the public and immediately disclose all relevant recall and replacement information as soon as possible. Even if the recall was the result of a purchasing, out-sourcing or offshoring decision, the company should take shared responsibility for the error. Consumers are forgiving, so if a firm apologizes, acknowledges the problem, and doesn't make the mistake again and again, consumers will continue to be loyal to that brand."

TOP STRATEGIC ACTION TAKEN TO IMPROVE REVERSE LOGISTICS PERFORMANCE IS TO DEVELOP STANDARDIZED R3 PROCESSES

A 2010 study by the Aberdeen Group found that developing a standardized return, repair, and refurbishment process was the top action by businesses seeking to improve reverse logistics performance. Source: Aberdeen Group, February 2010



Establish Standards for Success

A 2010 study by the Aberdeen Group found 70 percent of businesses cited as their top priority the development of standardized processes for return, repair, and refurbishment of goods. This requires a thorough internal review of current processes and the development and articulation of clearly defined returns procedures and guidelines. In addition, key personnel will need to be empowered to oversee and enforce the new way of doing things. Establishing uniformity throughout the returns process will add efficiency and help control costs while providing customers with greater insight and tracking capability.

How to Get There: Building an Effective B2B Returns Management Process

Clearly, there is much at stake when it comes to effective management of B2B returns. But the right logistics partner will ensure that a business adopts a returns policy that meets its precise needs and be able to seamlessly manage the returns flow.

The first step is to choose a logistics partner – and to choose wisely. A business will need to shop around, do its homework, ask a lot of questions, and make sure the logistics provider it selects has the experience, capacity, and capability to perform as promised. For example, a business that conducts a high volume of B2B transactions in Canada will want a logistics partner that understands the U.S./Canada border process and has a Canadian distribution network in place.

A good logistics partner will work with you from the ground up – become totally immersed in understanding your business – and then develop a customized solution that meets your business's unique needs. Fashion manufacturers, for example, would want a logistics provider that could move product directly to a secondary market, without having to endure a temporary stop in a warehouse.

Not surprisingly, technology and "better thinking" have enabled many innovations in returns management logistics. Today a business can have in place a returns strategy that is every bit as effective and cost efficient as its outbound logistics plans. Among other things, a technology-driven returns strategy must do the following:

- Allow business insight into the volume of returns
- Provide businesses with a "heads-up" to any potential product defect
- Prevent returns from being incorrectly addressed or delivered
- Trigger shipments that require special compliance or border clearance requirements
- Facilitate the returns process
- Allow 24/7 tracking capability

Clearly, technology has helped businesses gain control of their returns process. But as with most things, the devil is in the details, and a business must work closely with its logistics provider to develop a returns strategy that meets its unique needs.

A comprehensive returns strategy should include the following components:

Flexibility in Scheduling

Build a returns management strategy that gives you the level of service you need. Do you need to receive returns on a daily basis, or would a weekly or even bi-weekly schedule be more appropriate for your business?

Centralized Returns Centers

Where exactly do you want your returns delivered? A growing trend is to process returns at a dedicated returns center rather than via a traditional distribution center. For one thing, most distribution centers are geared toward outbound shipments rather than processing individualized returns. A dedicated returns center allows businesses to focus resources and build best practices. And problems associated with multiple retailers individually returning goods can be averted. In fact, having a dedicated returns center in place can be as much as 20 times more efficient than having multiple processing points.

Border Consolidation

If a border crossing is involved, consider having your goods consolidated at the border so that shipments are allowed to clear customs as a single unit. Border consolidation can facilitate the customs review process and reduce costs as well.

Integrated Returns Material Authorization (RMA)

Through the RMA process, a return must be preauthorized, either through an 800-number or a web-based portal, and issued an RMA number that will serve to track the package through the returns process. A returns authorization label can be preprinted and included with the outbound shipment or a web-based system can print a label after the RMA number has been assigned. There are many advantages to the RMA process:

- Preprinted labels ensure that returns are delivered precisely where you want them to go
- Preprinted bar codes allow you to capture precise information about the reason for return and advance notice of exactly what is being returned and when
- RMA numbers allow employees to easily track returns and serve as a reference point

Multi-Channel Visibility

The effect that your returns process will have on customer satisfaction cannot be overstated. Customers are demanding that returns be handled quickly and with complete visibility into the process. As many as 85 percent of B2C online shoppers will not return to a retailer if the returns process is not convenient. Allowing visibility into the process can give customers direct information about the process of their return and some degree of explanation should a delay occur. Some news is better than no news!

- Web-based portals allow 24/7 access to returns information. Key company systems – finance, customer service, warehousing – could be integrated to provide updated progress reports.
- Carrier integration allows RMAs to be linked with carrier tracking numbers, which can then be linked to automatically generated notifications or made available on a web-based portal.

Conclusion

A May 2014 Forbes magazine article highlighted a scenario in which a hypothetical business manager, who is in charge of her company's procurement operations, spends her weekends shopping for household and personal goods online. So when the manager arrives at work on Monday morning, faced with making smart and cost-effective purchases for her company, she naturally goes online, seeking the same level of product information and price comparisons she experienced over the weekend.

This example illustrates the changing face of B2B commerce and its inherent levels of returns. Today's B2B transactions are technology-driven and highly efficient. Yesterday's manual purchase orders and handwritten invoices are giving way to online orders and integrated data systems. And with this change in processes has come a change in thinking about how to manage B2B returns.

While reasons for B2B returns continue to largely fall with one of the main buckets they always have (Product Defect, Product Recall, Parts Returns, End-of-Life Merchandise, Warranty Return, or Obsolete/Unsold Merchandise), businesses have gotten smarter about returns management.

Today's businesses are looking at product returns as opportunities rather than as the "evil stepsister" of the supply chain. Businesses are finding revenue opportunities in their returns and also seizing the opportunity to make positive connections with customers and burnish their corporate identities.

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Purolator International
1.888.511.4811
wedelivercanada@purolator.com
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