



IT STARTS WITH A SITE SURVEY

Making the Case for Material Handling Warehouse Consultants

The Takeaway

If business is brisk, but safety and customer service are concerns, then it's time to rethink your warehousing and distribution operations.

The Details

Once a warehouse consultant comes on the scene to start the site survey, it doesn't take long for the problems to come to light—issues that the company itself may have been overlooking for months or even years.

For example, Eddie McLendon, warehouse products territory manager for Toyota Material Handling, says that it's not unusual to see workers using reach trucks to grab pallets, bring those pallets down, remove products from them, and then try to situate the first pallet back up onto the racking unit.

In these situations, McLendon will usually say, "Have you ever thought about using a different piece of equipment to go up there and pick those orders, as in an order picker?" In most cases, the answer is: "Yeah, but this is how we've always done it."

Those words echo through warehouses and DCs nationwide, and often deter operations managers from making the moves they must make in order to adjust to the changing demands of the modern-day distribution environment. For those companies that do embrace change, a site survey typically starts by inventorying all forklifts and determining how that equipment is being used in the facility.

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From there, McLendon talks to managers about their forklift-related maintenance calls and hours of operation. These two indicators often help identify vehicles that may be obsolete and in need of replacement.

According to Steve Lowe, vice president of sales and marketing at Allied Toyota Lift, you need to ask at least one important question about your operation: Are we encountering a high number of safety problems?

If people are getting hurt, if products are being damaged, or if there have been numerous “near misses” on the warehouse floor, then there might be opportunities for changes to your warehouse space and storing procedures to be safer.

“Anytime a warehouse looks ‘messy’ it’s a good indicator of a safety problem,” says Lowe. “When forklift drivers can’t see around corners and workers are stacking pallets all over the floor, your facility is ripe for a site survey.”

Another key question to ask yourself is: Do we have any unhappy customers, despite the fact that we feel like we’re plowing ahead full-steam in our industry? “If sales are up but your customers are unhappy,” says Lowe, “then you probably have an inventory management problem that requires a site survey and warehouse consultation.”

On the warehouse floor, a site survey helps detect storage problems (e.g., stacks of pallets that are pushed into corners using hand pallet jacks), inventory management issues, and poor use of vertical space.

“Many times, managers will tell us that they don’t have enough space, and meanwhile they have products stacked 12 feet high in a building with 25-foot ceilings,” says Lowe. “That’s where we enter the scene by suggesting a combination of electric reach trucks and order pickers to optimize that unused vertical space.” According to Lowe, that single move allowed one operation to draw three times as much storage space out of its facility and improve its throughput by 300%.

Lowe says that he talks to the operations managers about what a typical business day looks like and what types of promises are made to customers. He also closely examines the company’s existing distribution and fulfillment operation and then relates that information back to the firm’s material handling, automation, and robotics needs. Often working with Toyota Commercial Finance, Lowe will help put together a financing package that accommodates the operations needs on all levels.

All of these steps culminate into a complete warehouse optimization package designed to help operations achieve and exceed their customer service, safety, and profitability goals. “By getting material handling professionals involved early in the process,” adds Lowe, “this operation was able to optimize its space and equipment in a way that it may not have been able to handle on its own.”