CASE STUDY:
TECHNOLOGY QUENCHES
THIRST FOR ROUTE
ACCOUNTING EFFICIENCY
Ramping Up Automation with an Eye on Growth

Prior to the joint venture, Alliance had developed a home-grown, pick-to-belt system to manage its warehouse operations. When the corporate footprint expanded, management sought out a more robust system to ensure the company could continue to manage the seasonality of the business without sacrificing pick rates or accuracy.

With an eye on future growth, the major challenge facing Alliance’s leadership team was ensuring integration and scalability. Their priority was to find an automation strategy that would efficiently manage the burgeoning number of SKUs, build in scalability for future expansion, and successfully compete in today’s challenging marketplace. The team’s objectives included seamless integration and synchronization of all facilities, increased pick and load rates and accuracy, and increased ability to measure and analyze performance metrics. These initiatives were aimed at dynamically managing warehouse and distribution operations to improve efficiency, productivity and overall business performance.

Family-owned-and-operated, Alliance Beverage Distributing prides itself on offering the most diverse beer, wine and non-alcoholic beverage portfolio in West Michigan, with more than 5,000 SKUs – and counting. The Grand Rapids-based distributor, a joint venture between Kent Beverage and B&B Distributing launched in 2013, delivers 7.2 million CEs annually to more than 4,500 restaurants, neighborhood taverns and local retail establishments.

Shannon Gary
Alliance Beverage
Maximizing Speed and Accuracy from Order to Delivery

To achieve their goals, Alliance invested in integrated RAS, WMS and WCS systems, as well as handheld iOS devices and mobile printers for every route driver, aiming to maximize speed and accuracy at every step of the distribution process – from order submission, to picking and palletizing items, to delivery.
After three months of operating with our new integrated system, we saw a 39% increase in average cases picked per hour, a more than 50% reduction in warehouse breakage, significantly lower team fatigue, and improved morale overall.

Shannon Gary  
Alliance Beverage

The Solution

eoTouch® is the premier iOS sales App from Rutherford Associates. Using eoTouch, the Alliance route delivery team can quickly create and submit orders from the field. Orders are then dispatched and processed from within eoStar® Route Accounting Software, which adjusts order quantities based on inventory and stages them to be palletized. A built-in palletization function enables optimization of pallets for each route. With warehouse systems coordinated, eoStar can send partial work for the pick-to-belt crew and simultaneously deploy the pick-to-pallet team via Voice Pick. eoStar’s pick overview screen enables monitoring of metrics, including pick rates per worker, short picks, out of stocks, and overall work completion percentages.

Alliance reports that the WMS and tablet App has significantly improved management of warehouse operations. Every pallet is recorded with the item, supplier code date and quantity. In addition, each location in the warehouse is tracked to indicate product location, and fork lifts with long-range scanners and mounted tablets facilitate product movement to ensure accuracy of inventory and FIFO activity.

According to Shannon Gary, the firm’s Chief of Operations Officer, “After three months of operating with our new integrated system, we saw a 39 percent increase in average cases picked per hour, a more than 50 percent reduction in warehouse breakage, significantly lower team fatigue, and improved morale overall.”
Embracing Mobility

Capitalizing on mobile technology, including mobile printing solutions, to provide fast, top-notch service to every customer served by Alliance’s 60 delivery routes has also been a top priority. For busy customers – and drivers tasked with a demanding delivery schedule – time is of the essence, always. “We want our people to get in and out of the store with minimal disruption to our customer’s day,” says Joe Gass, Systems Administrator at Alliance.

On the recommendation of Rutherford and Associates, Alliance field-tested and selected Brother RuggedJet® 4030ai mobile printers. Fast, tough and durable, this series was designed for high-speed, iOS applications in a rugged environment, producing high-resolution 2- to 4-inch wide documents, receipts and labels. The printers use convenient drop-in thermal rolls and are certified by Rutherford and other industry-leading solution developers. The Brother printer plays an integral role in helping make customer deliveries and service as fast and efficient as possible.
ON-THE-ROAD RELIABILITY

Both management and drivers quickly became fans of the compact, lightweight devices for four key reasons:

SUPER EASY TO USE. The RuggedJet Series of mobile printers offer multiple connectivity options, including Bluetooth® wireless technology, MFi and Wi-Fi, and are the first in their class to be Apple® AirPrint® certified, ensuring seamless printing from iOS devices without requiring any downloads or integration software.

“Our manager used to spend a good part of every morning with a set of printers and fleet operators who couldn’t connect. Now it takes only a few minutes,” Gass says. “The driver turns on the Bluetooth, the printer name pops up on the screen, the device is paired, and it works. It’s interoperability right out of the gate.”

OUTSTANDING DURABILITY. Brother’s mobile printers are IP54 certified, with rugged construction and multiple drop specs to withstand the dust, temperature extremes and bumps inevitably encountered in the tough on-the-road environment. “These devices tend to live rough lives, but they’re rugged and have held up to the task,” Gass notes.

IMPRESSIVE SPEED. Fast print speed of up to 5 inches per second means speedier transactions, less wasted time, increased productivity, and higher customer satisfaction. “When you’re printing a scan sheet 100 inches long, that speed helps,” Gass explains. “Drivers don’t have to stand there twiddling their thumbs, waiting while it churns out.”

WARRANTY LIKE NO OTHER. Alliance also values the five-year ‘bumper-to-bumper’ warranty option that guarantees a fix or a replacement in the case of any trouble. “That’s two years more than others we reviewed,” Gass says. “To us, that shows Brother has confidence in the product.”

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Raise a glass to a game-changer

To ensure the mobile printers fit seamlessly into the route drivers’ workflow, the Alliance fleet manager built custom dolly frames to securely hold the mobile printers. “The drivers just pop them in and they’re good to go,” Gass says.

The RuggedJet 4 printers give the drivers anywhere, anytime ability to print a wide variety of documents, including reviews and final invoices, scan sheets for customers who track inventory with UPCs, truck inventories, short reports, and delivery and returned goods receipts – especially helpful since Michigan is a deposit state.

Alliance also appreciates the RuggedJets’ attractive price point, which enables the company to keep a couple of extra devices on hand for use during high volume seasons or in case service issues arise.

Field results are in and the Alliance team couldn’t be more pleased with the project’s ROI, from supporting the ability to deliver more beverages faster and with better accuracy, to improved responsiveness to customer needs, to higher driver satisfaction. “Our plan is to continue growing with the eoStar and Brother brands,” Gass says.
Brother Mobile Solutions is a premier provider of mobile printing solutions for workforces on the go. The growing product lineup includes compact, mobile thermal full-page and small-format thermal receipt and label printers; handheld and desktop laminated label printers; and wide-format, desktop thermal paper label printers.

Brother mobile products division serves a variety of industries including field services, retail, grocery, route, public safety, transportation, oil & gas, and healthcare workforces – all through its network of authorized resellers. Products include the legendary Brother PocketJet Series full page mobile printer, new rugged carry and vehicle mount cases, plus the RuggedJet Series label and receipt printers in 2” to 4” formats with advanced wireless features and rugged functionality.

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