



A Perfect Opportunity to Automate

As director of automated packaging solutions for Sparck Technologies in North America, Sean Webb runs the organization's U.S. operations, which has been working with a growing number of shippers that see automation as the answer to some of their most pressing order packaging fulfillment challenges.

In this Q&A session, Webb highlights some of the top trends taking place in packaging fulfillment right now, discusses the role that the e-commerce boom is playing in the supply chain and paints a forward-looking picture of the future of automated packaging.



Sean Webb

Director of Sales and Service, NA
Sparck Technologies

Q: What are some of the key trends taking shape right now in the fulfillment packaging environment?

A: Most people are familiar with the current e-commerce environment, where everyone is sitting at home pointing, clicking and ordering. They're very comfortable with it. Even my parents, who had always gone to stores, are now ordering everything they can from home. This has created a new business environment for a lot of fulfillment centers. It's extremely exciting, but it's also overwhelming.

For example, what used to be a DC's peak season is now the "new normal," with peak season layered on top of that. This and other realities have made fulfilling orders a major operational challenge. In the past, companies would add more labor resources to solve the problem, but you just can't do that in this environment.

Instead of filling more people into that same space to get more production—something that can't be done during a global pandemic—everyone is turning to

automation for help in many different areas of the fulfillment center. And because packaging hasn't necessarily always been automated, there are some real opportunities to find efficiencies in this area.

Q: What key challenges are shippers facing in this environment specific to packaging?

A: In today's business environment, the connection that companies have with their customers is critical, and even more important than it's ever been in the past. Where companies were once able to fulfill orders and deliver them to customers without giving much thought to the actual "unboxing" experience, that experience has become a critical connection to the shipper's brand and product. Rising DIM weight and freight charges are also pushing more companies to right-size their shipments.

And while consumers are not making as many visits to physical stores, the packaging connection has become as important and challenging as ever. Companies have to think about right-sizing their packages for specific products and ensuring that they don't send out huge boxes packed with void fill. Certainly, the conversations about environmental challenges related to climate change are getting louder and louder. These and other challenges are pushing organizations to look more closely at automated packaging options.

Q: How does automated packaging help companies keep pace in light of these challenges?

A: From a productivity standpoint, automation provides significant advantages over manual packing. Companies using fit-to-size automated packaging can really count on higher throughput and better use of labor resources. It also helps companies ensure that they have the labor to support their needs, peaks and future growth.

Automation provides that consistency and the throughput that operators or operations can count on to meet those needs. Automated packaging is also flexible and supports the packaging of hard or soft goods as well as single- and multi-item orders of many different sizes.

Q: What does the future hold for automated packaging?

A: This year, more shippers are asking themselves questions like: How do I automate? How do I incorporate that automation? How do I integrate everything together to create a smooth, end-to-end process? That last question is particularly important because companies used to just integrate the most obvious, easiest sections of the process without automating the rest of their operations.

Now, the same companies are looking at how they can create the right-size package and get the right label on that package in a very streamlined, end-to-end manner. This is definitely something companies are factoring in as they build out new automated facilities or upgrade existing warehouses.

In other words, they aren't just identifying one small problem and trying to fix it with packaging automation. They're looking at the whole process, knowing that all of the different parts have to be able to flow through together. It's a very exciting time from an automation standpoint, and I think it's just going to continue to grow and accelerate in the next few years.

Q: How does Sparck help companies tackle some of these challenges?

A: Sparck is a proven leader in the fit-to-size automated packaging landscape. We're here to help companies understand what their options are, find the right fit for their specific needs and help them achieve the best ROI possible.