

UNEX CASE STUDY

“The system makes inventory control easy. We can keep track of everything we have, so that when our stores need a specific paint, we can find it fast and fulfill the order accurately”

– Charles Aubuchon, VP of Distribution Center Operations

customer: AUBUCHON HARDWARE

operation: Hardware Store Chain

goal: Improve pick efficiencies for split case paint cans

solution: Flow Cell from UNEX



A Break in the Case

Paint Can Racks Keep Aisles Clear, Speed Pick Rates by 50% at Distribution Center

With dozens of paint cans stacking up in the distribution center, Aubuchon Hardware needed to get its inventory under control. The company turned to UNEX to design a storage and flow solution that would save space, increase productivity and ensure accurate order fulfillment at the warehouse.

The Situation

Aubuchon Hardware is the oldest family owned and operated chain of hardware stores in America. The chain includes 120 stores in Connecticut, Maine, Massachusetts, New Hampshire, New York and Vermont. Each day, the company’s distribution center in Massachusetts fulfills dozens of orders and ships them to Aubuchon Hardware stores across New England.

“Our stores rely on the distribution center to have the products in stock when they need them, so they can stay competitive with national hardware chains,” says Charles Aubuchon, VP of Distribution Center Operations for Aubuchon Hardware. “Inventory control is a major issue for the warehouse.”

But inventory control became a concern after Aubuchon Hardware added the Benjamin Moore® line of paint to its product offering. The primers and white paint were moving quickly, so employees shipped them by the case. “But our stores didn’t need full cases of the colors and tints because they are slow movers,” says Charles. “We decided to break the cases on the slow movers to give our stores more flexibility to order one quart or gallon at a time.”



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The idea made the space-constrained stores happy but created storage issues for the warehouse. “There are more Benjamin Moore® SKUs than you can shake a finger at,” says Charles. “We couldn’t store all those extra paint cans on pallets because we’d take up all our aisle space. Plus, our existing flow racks were not strong enough to handle the weight.”

Exploring the Options

Aubuchon Hardware turned to distributor Northland Industrial Truck Co., Inc. (NITCO) for help. “When I met with the Aubuchon team, we explored the options,” says Scott Ferris, NITCO’s Vice President of Sales. “Placing the SKUs on pallets was not a good choice. All the different types of paint would be hard to organize, which could result in mispicks. Static shelving also was not a good option because inventory would have been left sitting idle, and you would not have the first in, first out benefit.”

Scott contacted UNEX, the industry leader in innovative order picking solutions. “I felt confident that UNEX could solve this problem,” says Scott. “Working with UNEX is always a real partnership.”

UNEX engineers visited the distribution center, evaluated the product flow and inventory, and designed the perfect rack system for quart cans.

A Custom Solution for Flowing Round Objects

UNEX created a flow rack system, Flow Cell, measuring 96” wide by 96” deep and 84” high. The rack included 7 levels containing 13 lanes of 6” wide tracks with 1” roller centers and guardrails. Designers added snap-on slow-down plates to prevent denting and created the appropriate rise across the lanes to ensure optimal flow of the paint cans.

“With UNEX Flow Cell and Span-Track, we can slot 180 SKUs in a 20-foot section,” says Charles. “The system is strong enough to hold thousands of pounds, and it’s durable and adjustable. We incorporated it right into the pick path.”

The UNEX solution worked so well that Aubuchon Hardware asked UNEX to design a similar system to manage slow-moving gallon cans of paint. Charles says employees can slot about 120 gallons of paint in the new rack. “The system makes inventory control easy. We can keep track of everything we have, so that when our stores need a specific paint, we can find it fast and fulfill the order accurately.”

Charles estimates that pick rates have increased substantially with the flow rack system. “The picker can pull up to an area and easily pick multiple SKUs without having to move his tuggler. This has cut picking rates by about 50%.”

Running ‘Lean and Mean’

Charles says that competition is tough for a family owned business. Aubuchon Hardware competes with ACE®, True Value® and other big chains.

“We have to run lean and mean. At the same time, we have to stay on top of inventory so that we always have what our stores need to meet customers’ demands,” says Charles. “To be successful in this business, you can’t be as good as the competition; you have to be better.”



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