



Standardizing Shipments

Setting retailers up for exceptional customer service and long-term success

by PAUL VACHON

The growth of ecommerce brings new levels of complexity that affect all aspects of the retail operation. These include refinements to inventory management, cash flow and, perhaps most importantly, shipping goods to the consumer — that essential linchpin on which all ecommerce relies.

A new tool aimed at addressing these needs is ShipStation, a cloud-based program that manages all aspects of the shipping and delivery process, providing both efficiency for the merchant and a quality experience for the customer.

ShipStation's flexibility allows it to mold to the needs of any e-merchant. One such client is The Groomsman Suit, a seller of wedding-related suits and formal wear. In the early days the company packaged, labeled and arranged for all its shipping personally — a task that soon became unwieldy.

"Once we exceeded 100 orders per day, we knew we needed to improve the process," says Jeanne Foley, co-founder of the Chicago-based company.

ShipStation was the second option the company investigated, and it soon realized it would be a great fit. "ShipStation allows for instant comparison between carriers for rates, transit times and integrates with Shopify, which we use as a shopping cart."

The three-year-old company does virtually all its business online, so a reliable shipping resource which offers all the needed features — including returns — is a must. "In this day and age, no one can survive without efficient and free exchanges and returns," Foley says.

The Groomsman Suit has now grown to the point where a majority of its orders are shipped through a regional fulfillment center, which uses its own internal

software. In this situation, ShipStation imports the data from the third-party source and seamlessly integrates it with shipments originating in house.

"Whether an order ships through ShipStation or not, it lives in its database and is reflected in the analytic data," Foley says.

ACTIONAL DATA

The need for a program like ShipStation arose from the inherent complexity of ecommerce. In 2009, two ecommerce consultants were working with their customers to print and ship orders directly from the eBay network. "They developed a program called Octane, which emerged as a plugin for the eBay network," says John Kinny, ShipStation's general manager. "It was a tremendous success, and soon they had people coming to them saying they dealt with orders



from Amazon and eBay and wanted a similar but more comprehensive tool.”

These new prospects were looking for a way to standardize shipments off both platforms — a daunting task, as the two companies’ systems were fundamentally different. Bringing order to this chaos was the inspiration for developing ShipStation in 2011. In a nutshell, ShipStation proactively tracks each order through each step of the fulfillment process.

“If you have a retail form of POS, if you sell via Square at a country craft fair, if you sell on Amazon, eBay or another of the big marketplaces, we handle each exactly the same,” Kinny says.

ShipStation imports orders from almost any channel — an online marketplace, a shopping cart service like Shopify or an e-retailer’s proprietary site — and maximizes efficiency by shopping the best carrier for optimal rates and quickest delivery. It then prints the label for a given order’s package per that carrier’s system.

To optimize workflow, ShipStation also employs filters to alert staff on how to prioritize the pulling and packing of orders to meet a given carrier’s pickup time.

“This step allows the business to sell later, and to let the warehouse staff know when to pull the UPS orders, when to pull the FedEx orders,” Kinny says. “Being able to ship an order faster results in an improved cash flow and happier customers.”

Once an order goes out the door, ShipStation uses geo-tracking that reports a shipment’s status (including the tracking number) to the buyer and seller via social media links and text messaging. If the customer opts for a return after delivery, they can set it up by accessing ShipStation’s online self-service portal and use the enclosed preprinted return label for ease and convenience.

Back at the warehouse, the inventory tracking feature monitors stock levels and pushes alerts when levels dip below a pre-established threshold. More importantly, the appropriate selling channel is updated.

Finally, screens devoted to analytics offer actionable data including the aging of all pending orders, revenue comparison between new and returning customers, calculation of shipping cost versus revenue per individual customer and calculation of profit or loss, status of inventory levels and more.

ShipStation accomplishes this level of synergy by leveraging a robust network of partners which play equally essential roles in the shipping process. These third parties fall into different categories: selling channels (Shopify and WooCommerce), marketplaces (eBay and Amazon), enterprise resource planning systems (NetSuite and Acumatica) and carriers (FedEx and UPS).

“Regardless of where an order comes from, we want to be able to connect all

of them into a single workflow where we can optimize which get shipped and which get prioritized,” Kinny says.

The partner network also includes several supportive platforms considered “best in class” in their respective niches. “These can be important tools in the world of ecommerce,” Kinny says.

Examples include Avalara for sales tax management, ChannelAdvisor for marketplace listing, and QuickBooks for accounting. ShipStation is capable of seamlessly integrating with each of these platforms to share data and monitor a merchant’s performance in these other areas. But by syncing with ShipStation, all the data is immediately accessible through a single portal.

FREEDOM FROM DETAILS •

Shady Rays, a purveyor of sunglasses based in Louisville, Ky., has been using ShipStation for several months and has found it to be an effective delivery system for every aspect of the shipping process. “Being a very customer-focused company, we strive to make every customer experience a positive one,” says Dan Ratterman, distribution operations manager. “ShipStation’s simple interface presents clear directions on what we need to do to package an order correctly.” Freedom from details like these allows Ratterman and his team to focus on meeting customer expectations.

Ratterman takes advantage of the smartphone app that ShipStation offers. The app takes the most essential functions from the ShipStation dashboard and packs them into a small space with tabs that report the sales volume represented by deliveries (for the day, week or month), and allow the user to view reports, obtain shipping quotes, and communicate with customers.

That comprehensive approach is in keeping with ShipStation’s overarching goal — to maximize all delivery related options to enable ecommerce merchants to grow their businesses. **STORES**

Detroit-based Paul Vachon writes for various trade publications, in addition to feature stories for consumer magazines and books on Michigan history and travel.