



Sona Enterprises

Sona scraps walk-around warehousing; put legs on operations with AccellosOne WMS 6.4

California is renowned for garage-shop enterprises that have achieved serious success. True to the tradition, Sona Enterprises -- a wholesale/distribution company founded by Sudhir and Sadhana Mundhra in 1991 -- bustled with activity from the start, and the family garage was action-central.

The garage was where ordering, receiving, storing, and shipping an eclectic array of imported hobby and sports related merchandise took place. Inventory has since expanded to include pens and jewelry, flashlights, power tools, cutlery, camping and emergency equipment, and more; all destined for a diverse retail community of some 3,000 outlets across the United States, Canada, and Mexico. The company now operates out of an office located in Santa Fe Springs, California. Additionally, Sona Enterprises runs a warehousing and distribution center of some 60,000 square feet with a 10 person staff.

Selling the products under its own brand, Sona has continued to broaden its market to include gift shops, travel agencies, camping and hiking outfitters, auto dealerships/parts stores/repair shops, jewelry, and convenience stores; virtually any type of outlet with customers and a cash register. Meanwhile, inventory has blossomed from those first few dozen high-turnover, largely impulse items, to a current count of some 3,000 SKUs.

Growth was not without its pressures. In mid-2012, the company launched a technology initiative that brought sorely needed efficiency to its office processes and positive control to its warehouse operations: a warehouse and office management solution that integrated an AccellosOne Warehouse Management System 6.4 (WMS) with the ERP software.

Sourcing Product

Still family-owned and operated, Sona Enterprises sources all of its products through some 20 suppliers; most in China but supplemented by others in India and Pakistan. These suppliers conduct frequent purchasing trips to restock depleted and/or fast-moving items and to explore opportunities to add new items to inventory.

As a stocking distributor, Sona takes ownership of the merchandise. The company maintains upwards of 90 percent of its products in inventory and routinely accommodating walk-in and drive-up customers as well as fulfilling less urgent orders primarily through parcel carriers. Sona teams regularly attend events intended to broaden the company's marketing scope, among them general merchandise shows and variety store expositions.

Lack of organization

Before implementation of the new software, the Sona warehouse staff put merchandise wherever there was space available; with no logic involved other than the usually well-developed memories of individual workers. Trouble was, unless the person who put the goods away was the one detailed to pick them, time taken to locate items could become excessive.

"As our inventory became larger and more diverse, our fulfillment procedures become problematical," says Sudeep Patel, the company's information technology expert and husband of the Mundhra's daughter, administrative manager Sonal Patel. "We were completely memory based...often pickers had no idea where items were located, so they would have to walk the aisles looking for them. Not only did this preclude use of temporary workers, we had no insight into overall warehouse effectiveness and no way to measure performance, track mistakes or assure inventory accuracy.

Fulfillment of certain orders, particularly the walk-in/drive-up ones, could take up to a couple of hours. This was not at all representative of the kind of customer service Sona hoped to provide."

Technology

Management recognized that its memory-based warehouse operations had to give way to technology. An initial effort involved a limited business and inventory management software solution that kept the company informed of stock levels, but provided no effective putaway and picking support. Patel was assigned to identify a new technology solution

AccellosOne Warehouse Management Systems

FEATURES/BENEFITS

- Integration of AccellosOne WMS, SAP ERP
- AccellosOne Ship integrated with WMS
- Microsoft SQL Server inventory database
- Go-live ahead of schedule, under budget
- Interactive display of warehouse activities
- Individual order or wave picking
- Minimal staff training required
- Precise putaway; Better stock visibility
- Faster picks, fewer errors, more productivity
- Improved product movement awareness
- Better order tracking, fewer returns
- More concise purchasing decisions

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and in his search he examined a range of the best-known business and warehouse management systems.

The solution now in place in comprised of an ERP system and AccellosOne WMS 6.4. The ERP software provides an effective platform for managing the company's office operations, while AccellosOne WMS inventory management and order fulfillment capabilities have allowed the company to reach new heights of efficiency and customer service.

The Accellos Answer

AccellosOne WMS is a scalable and flexible real-time warehouse management software system that streamlines operations and inventory management through the use of automated paper-free processes, and radio frequency (RF) communications. With these technologies, it tracks stock into, out of, and within warehouses, streamlining and verifying processes with each movement.

For inbound product, it facilitates receiving up to full containers and coordinates the breakdown and putaway activities. For picking and shipping, it facilitates order receipt and fulfillment through paper pick tickets or wireless RF terminals, customer compliant label generation, and real-time integration back to the ERP software. In addition to these user-proven capabilities, Version 6.4 of the software also provides extended functionality for orders, receipts, inventory management and task management through on-screen graphical interactive displays.

Other new or enhanced features include powerful traceability, integrated document imaging, enhanced shipping workflow, integrated order consolidation and load/route planning, advanced reporting, and tighter integration with the AccellosOne Workspace framework; an intuitive interface and control panel for system operation.

Five-day Implementation

Patel made the decision to purchase the AccellosOne WMS and ERP systems in mid-2012. Patel chose to set up a virtualized server to house the software; which included Microsoft SQL Server 2008 database for inventory information. Compatibility with the ERP system was a major decision factor.

Sona obtained the WMS solution directly from Accellos following a field demonstration by their Accellos sales representative. Accellos then assigned the project to implementation partner, who launched it with a briefing on the software's capabilities and its operation.

The on-site work fell to a trusted Integration Specialist who configured the software using Accellos' Integration Framework to activate the necessary modules. Some additional information and minor configuration were involved but, the Integration Specialist notes: "...the Integration Framework does a lot of the work for you."

The project commenced in September 2012, with the AccellosOne WMS software implemented first to allow time "...to get comfortable with the system," Patel says.

With that comfort level established, implementation of the ERP software followed.

The warehouse layout had been partially defined for the earlier software, but was finalized into an arrangement of 30 aisles (101-130), two-digit bays/bins (01), and two-digit shelves (01, 02, 03). Allowances were included for alpha characters designating shelf locations, but are not yet used. With the physical locations defined (e.g. 101-01-01), the implementation partner replicated them in the AccellosOne WMS software to provide Sona with precise references both for directed putaway and picking.

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- Patel

With the software configured and the warehouse locations specified, Sona shut down operations for two days to put the stock away and record its placement in the AccellosOne WMS records. Meanwhile, ERP partner had proceeded with the installation of the ERP solution. The implementation partner completed the process with an integration link that allows data to pass automatically and transparently between the two systems.

“The Accellos team was really good,” Patel says, noting that the actual implementation was completed in only five days, well ahead of schedule and under budget. “Accellos was the right size company for us to work with,” he adds. “They had the capabilities and resources needed to get the software installed quickly as well as to support us once the solution was running.”

Workflow

Sona maintains close vendor relationships, continuously restocking many of the items that it carries. Its new inventory management solution has enhanced those relationships, simplifying the restocking processes by enabling better inventory control and better reordering procedures.

Orders are normally placed on-site during buying trips and otherwise via purchase orders issued through the ERP software. The documentation automatically filters down to the AccellosOne WMS software so that when merchandise arrives and is unloaded, it can be verified against purchase orders and checked into inventory using the wireless handheld devices.

Inbound merchandise arrives by container, preceded by an emailed shipping notice informing the company of the container’s contents and shipping details. On its arrival at the port, Sona coordinates delivery with the respective freight forwarder.

Contents arrive as full case packs, barcoded prior to shipment. Warehouse personnel scan the cartons, automatically confirming contents and quantities and posting the information wirelessly to the ERP system as well as to the AccellosOne WMS inventory records.

“This is a real-time process,” Patel says. “Previously, it could take from one to five days to complete receipt and putaway of a container. Now, we not only unload and warehouse the contents quickly, we also fill pre-orders right at the dock simply by scanning the barcodes. We utilize warehouse space more effectively, placing product wherever there is an opening and recording the location via a handheld device.”

While many walk-in orders are fulfilled, most arrive by phone or fax and are shipped by UPS Worldship. Arriving orders are keyed in to the ERP software, which downloads them to AccellosOne WMS where, depending on urgency, they might be picked directly or waved, with multiple orders picked simultaneously.

For waved orders, AccellosOne WMS prints pick tickets and carton labels, with the labels affixed to their respective cartons. The software generates a pick path that enables pickers to assemble the waved orders, scanning the barcodes to direct the picks as well as to update inventory records.

As the picks are completed, the orders move to the packing area, where the packing slips and the UPS Worldship labels are generated. Initially, these final phases were performed manually, but in mid-2013, Sona also went live with AccellosOne Ship, automating the shipping processes.

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- Patel

Results

While no metrics were taken before or after implementation of the software, several factors stand out, Patel says:

- merchandise can be picked within an hour of arrival, versus weeks or even months
- new personnel require only minimal training vs. a previous multi-month learning curve
- no guesswork about product location
- picking and putaway are faster, more efficient; even short two warehousemen, Sona experienced no picking/putaway delays
- the warehouse handles more orders per day with fewer fulfillment or shipping errors
- better product awareness: easy view of what turns fast/slow and why
- better order tracking/easy view of return rates
- stock levels are kept current, enabling better purchasing decisions

Management is delighted with AccellosOne WMS. “We returned from a recent show with more than 300 orders,” Patel says. “Before, it could take several weeks to find and ship all of that merchandise. This time, it took only a few days because the warehouse is well organized and our pickers work fast and error-free by following instructions on their handheld screens. The software is definitely having a major effect on Sona’s business.”

ABOUT ACCELLOS

Accellos is a global provider of software solutions specifically designed for the unique needs of logistics service providers and small and mid-sized businesses (SMB). Over 3,000 companies trust Accellos to be the technology backbone of their global supply chains. Accellos provides solutions for warehouse management systems (WMS), third party logistics (3PL), fleet management, transportation management systems (TMS), trading partner integration (EDI), automated barcode data collection, parcel shipping, transportation optimization and supply chain business intelligence. Accellos solutions are built on the AccellosOne platform, a modern technology platform featuring a user-friendly interface and simplified technical administration.



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