



Lydia[®]
LOGISTICS



Suisan says Aloha to Voice Technology Hawaiian foodservice distributor boosts pick productivity by over 20 percent.

Suisan Co. Ltd. may be more than 100 years old, but that doesn't stop this Hawaiian foodservice distributor from embracing the latest technologies. The company recently replaced paper-based picking with voice-directed technology – and increased worker productivity and fulfillment accuracy within a matter of weeks.

Suisan, which means “ocean product” in Japanese, is based in Hilo, the largest city on the Big Island of Hawaii. The company was founded in 1907 as a small fish market at Hilo's Wailoa Harbor for fishermen to sell their catch.

Over the years, the family-run business has transformed from a small fishery into a leading supplier of frozen foods, dry groceries, poultry and dairy products, fresh produce and desserts to more than 7,000 customers on the Big Island. Those customers include restaurants, hotels, supermarkets and schools.

“Today, about half of our customers are foodservice and the rest are retail,” says Paul J. Agamata, the company's IT director. “We serve all of the major chains on the island, including Walmart, Longs Drugs and Walgreens, as well as the local supermarkets, such as KTA Super Stores, Foodland and Sack N Save.”

The company, which posted \$80 million in annual sales last year, operates a 53,000-square-foot refrigerated warehouse in Hilo. It runs 24 hours a day, seven days a week, and carries more than 12,000 SKUs of frozen, chilled and dry food products, as well as chemicals, non-food items and paper. A fleet of refrigerated trucks, ranging from 16-foot vans to 40-foot trailers, makes daily deliveries throughout the entire island.

Growing pains

In recent years, Suisan expanded its product and service offerings to become a one-stop, full-service shop for customers. The company also began supplying non-food items to non-traditional customers, such as doctors' offices, cleaning companies and other businesses that do not typically purchase food products.

“I was shocked when I saw the results—I had to recheck my numbers. The productivity improvements were unbelievable.”
Paul Agamata,
Suisan's IT director

topVOX[®]
VOICE SOLUTIONS

While this growth helped drive sales, it also took a toll on the warehouse. Because of space constraints, Suisan wasn't able to change the layout of the warehouse to better suit its picking area, which the company had deemed the most problematic.

"We were having issues with accuracy – our error rate was fairly significant and our picks per hour were low," says Agamata. "Service level is important in the food industry – customers choose suppliers based on service – so we had to improve our accuracy as well as add value for our customers."



The company looked at barcode scanning, pick-to-light and voice systems and chose the Lydia® voice solution from topVOX Corp., Barrington, IL. Lydia® works by directing order selectors throughout the picking process by voice. Wearing headsets – instead of looking down at clipboards – order selectors are guided through their picking activities with their hands and eyes free.

"I found that voice would be the most cost-effective solution and I also liked the idea of hands-free picking – I knew it would create a safer work environment," says Agamata. "We chose topVOX as our vendor because of their professionalism and integrity. Their team was willing to go the extra mile to help us meet all of our objectives. We knew they would be the perfect partner for this project. Plus topVOX, unlike some of the other voice vendors, addressed one of our biggest challenges – the ethnic diversity of our selectors."

Since Suisan's 17 order selectors speak five different languages, including English, Chinese, Japanese, Korean and Tagalog, it was important to find a solution that could

understand the worker's responses. Lydia® is "speaker independent" meaning that the system can recognize different voices and accents without any "training". This enables workers to get up to speed much faster than those using "speaker dependent" systems, which call for the user to first speak into a microphone and "train" the system.

"We had to make a few vocabulary changes," says Agamata, "but our picking crew easily adapted. And they like the fact that they can adjust the sound and speed of the voice to make it audible and understandable in a noisy environment."

An important benefit of Lydia® is that workers can be fully trained in less than two days. "We are now able to hire new selectors and get them up and running in no time. It also gives us much more flexibility in terms of hiring seasonal help," says Agamata. Another plus was that the company's IT team was able to easily integrate the topVOX solution into its existing ERP system from Phoenix-based AFS Technologies. Suisan's workers wear topVOX's Voxter® compact computer units, in combination with barcode scanners from Intermec Inc., Everett, WA. Picking is directed by the Lydia® software and, because of all the checks built into the system, it's almost impossible for selectors to pick the wrong item.

Sounds of success

The proof is in the results. Within two months of implementation, Suisan saw accuracy increase by 30 percent and picks per hour by 20 percent. Initially, Agamata was anticipating a two year return on investment (ROI), but based on the initial productivity gains, he expects to see a return in less than a year.

With the topVOX system, Suisan can now measure how many picks per hour its workers are performing. "Before Lydia®, we didn't have the processes in place to monitor pick productivity. We're creating incentive programs and our crew is very excited about these new opportunities. After all, they are the ones that drove our success, as well as our partnership with topVOX."

Agamata says the company chose to work with topVOX because he felt its solution could handle the many challenges that the Suisan faced. "We couldn't change the layout of our warehouse and we carry a lot of products that have five or six different SKUs and we don't have enough pick slots," says Agamata. "We also carry a lot of specialty items from different countries, in different languages, which compounded the accuracy rate. And many of the specialty items need to be broken down to eaches, which compounded the problem even more."

After topVOX did an initial walk through of the warehouse and studied Suisan's picking processes, it developed a technology strategy within a week that Agamata felt was not only manageable but fiscally responsible as well. Now that the picking area has been completed, Suisan is expanding voice to its loading process, and eventually into receiving and inventory.

"This project has been hugely successful for us and there's been no downside to what we've done," says Agamata. "This is just the beginning of another transformation for Suisan. And we couldn't have achieved these results without the topVOX team."

Suisan Co. Ltd.

Location:

Hilo, Hawaii

Warehouse:

53-square-foot refrigerated facility

Customers:

7,000 foodservice and retail customers

Application:

Voice-directed picking

Results:

increased fulfillment accuracy by 30 percent and picking productivity by 20 percent

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VOICE SOLUTIONS

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