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> **E-Commerce:** E-COMMERCE GOES RETAIL

Welcome to the new distribution centre



A July 23 Not Like Any Other for Group Patrick Morin: GO-LIVE!

July 23, 2007.

11 h 00 a.m.

In a Joliette warehouse, a group of some thirty employees is in the process of writing a new page in the history of the Patrick Morin Group. Two months after the opening of the company's completely new distribution centre, the Warehouse Management System (WMS) is being launched with the fulfillment of the first order.

BY JULIE BROUARD

Guided by consultants from 4L2 Group and with the support of Sologlobe, Patrick Morin managers have implemented a sophisticated warehouse management system integrating a combination of the most recent technologies.

Covering 150,000 ft.² – including 20,000 for offices – the distribution centre has 20 loading docks and can manage up to 30,000 products. It has a Technirack storage system, conveyors from Expert Systèmes, Johnston forklift trucks, Intermec RF equipment, a Voxware voice recognition system and a Solochain WMS from Solotech.

"One of the advantages of starting from scratch, as we did here, is that we could introduce sophisticated equipment exactly meeting the needs of the Patrick Morin Group", says Stéphan Lauzon, of Group 4L2. "We were not restricted by the limits of an existing system."

The startup of the new distribution centre, a project launched more than two years ago, represents an important step forward for the hardware company established in Joliette since 1960. In particular, the company thus gains full control of its supply chain for its 13 current stores located in the regions of Lanaudière, the Laurentians, Mauricie, Montérégie and the Island of Montreal.

"The new centre will make it possible to improve inventory management and rationalize our inventory costs, as all orders will be centralized under a single roof," explained Yann Caron, manager of the new distribution centre. "We will thus be able to better serve our customers – contractors, builders, manufacturers and consumers."

Before the launching of the distribution centre, each store was responsible for its own inventory. Also, there was no central system and orders were made manually.

THE CHANGEOVER

The morning of July 23, the thirty employees, newly trained to operate the centre's different equipment, seem in full control of the situation, despite a few butterflies in the stomach.



"The fact of being a new distribution centre – each of the 13 Patrick Morin stores previously stocked up directly from suppliers – doesn't make it any easier", continued Stéphan Lauzon. "In fact, since everything was done manually before, we had to develop everything from scratch... so we have no safety net."

The system implementation process is often riddled with obstacles and unforeseen events that must be tackled while keeping a

cool head. And when the culminating point of the implementation arrives, when the switch is flipped on, there is often this fraction of a second when the heart skips a beat just before the big leap.

But in the control centre of this much anticipated launch – one of the distribution centre meeting rooms – everything seems actually quite calm the morning of July 23. All glued in front of their respective computers, the members of the team keep a cool head. "We know that there will be a few little bugs", said Yann Caron, manager of the centre. "There are always things we don't anticipate, or little problems with the system. But as a whole, with all the tests we have conducted, we are confident that the launching will go very well."

The first official order soon confirmed that any launching has its share of hitches. Some ambiguity appeared in the nomenclature to designate quantities in the system and that slowed the pace just as picking was to begin. But it was nothing that could not be quickly fixed. A brief discussion with resources of Sologlobe and appropriate changes were made to the system.

"With so many details to be planned and integrated in the system, sometimes you miss a few things," commented Yann Caron. "Terms that we use without thinking can be interpreted differently. We just have to make sure the system understands everything correctly."

Once this little problem was solved, taking just a few minutes, the work of picking the first order could resume its normal course. The first day, it was possible to process a total of 7 store-orders. Overall, the launching team managed to discover several corrections.

They worked long hours the first few days (24 hours the day of the launch and 18 hours the day after) before achieving a more normal rhythm. For this first official day of operation, the distribution centre contained about 4,000 products out of a possibility of 30,000. Twenty-five days later, August 16, it was completely functional and had 8,000 products. ■