

Furniture Today

Business Intelligence for the Furniture Industry

FurnitureToday.com

Aug

Rerouting the final mile

Carriers answer COVID-19 with new services, safety protocols

By Powell Slaughter
Senior Editor

HIGH POINT — The COVID-19 pandemic has forced final-mile carriers that service furniture sales to adjust their service levels and operations in new ways. Those range from altered schedules and patterns for delivery to new services that address consumer comfort levels with receiving goods in their home.

Final-mile carriers, particularly those serving the brick-and-mortar channel, have traditionally highlighted white-glove service, but COVID-19 has created a need for more basic methods such as threshold and room-of-choice delivery. Carriers also expanded into those less-detailed services to protect the safety of their own drivers and teams.

[continued on page 31](#)



COVID-19

continued from page 1

Christopher Carroll is general manager at Freight Club, which bills itself as "an Expedia for home delivery," setting up final-mile services through a national network of delivery partners with particular historical emphasis on the e-commerce channel.

"The first thing we saw was carriers removing in-home service options such as white glove and installation," he said. "Carriers were not only showing leadership and caution to ease the fear of the consumer, but also to keep employees safe."

"The role of the final-mile delivery team is one that puts them in front of several people each day, so they were inherently motivated to be diligent with taking precautions to reduce any risk of transmission."

Sun Delivery, the final-mile arm of American West, has specialized in white-glove home delivery, but COVID-19 had Sun expanding service offerings into threshold delivery for the first time.

"In March and April, we had a lot of consumers requesting a change from white glove to threshold delivery," said Aimee Boozer, vice president of in-home delivery. "At that time, probably 40% of our deliveries was to the front porch or threshold. Since then, things have moved back to a strong percentage of white glove."

"That's a modified version of white glove, though, complete with masks, gloves and social distancing that increased consumers' comfort level with that more detailed service in the home. Still, Sun looks to maintain alternative services."

"We're looking at keeping threshold delivery permanently and adding that to our service levels," Boozer said. "We're working on a rate structure for that now."

While some consumers still wanted white-glove treatment, RiteRouting has seen a huge increase other delivery options throughout COVID-19, said Aaron Nussbaum, director of logistics services. Typically RiteRouting's orders are 80% white glove delivery. This has dramatically



“We're looking at keeping threshold delivery permanently and adding that to our service levels.

Aimee Boozer
Sun Delivery/American West

decreased through COVID-19, but it is back around 50% now.

"During coronavirus, we started offering room-of-choice service. A lot of our drivers didn't want to be stuck inside a house for too long, and the consumers didn't want strangers in there for a long time either," Nussbaum said. "If it's an older person who needs a dresser on the second floor, we can do the heavy lifting, but the customer is responsible for the unpacking and disposable of materials."

More comfort with white glove

Carriers agreed that white-glove is coming back, especially as states ease restrictions and consumers adapt to life in the COVID-19 era.

FragilePAK President Julian Ludlow pointed out that, early on, the company agreed to hold off scheduled deliveries until consumers were comfortable receiving full white-glove service. Indeed, he and others said at first it was hard to obtain masks, hand sanitizers and other supplies for outfitting drivers out of the company's 93 service locations.

"We started seeing resistance from our driver force and the person who bought the furniture to going into homes," added James Liguori, CFO at FragilePAK. "People started saying, 'Can

you put it in the garage or on my covered porch?' Now we've been seeing white-glove coming back."

"As social distancing, masks, use of sanitizer came on and everyone's gotten used to PPE, people are more open to teams coming into the home as long as they're being safe," Ludlow noted. "Plus, there are people who physically can't handle moving these goods into the home."

Freight Club also sees re-emergence of consumer demand for white-glove services.

"They have not yet returned to pre-COVID levels, but the gap is shrinking each week," Carroll said. "In the month of July, our top three white glove service levels are 25% lower than they were pre-COVID, but if you look at the most recent week (July 20-27), it is only 18% lower than pre-COVID levels."

He added that brick-and-mortar retailers don't need to offer white glove to get online conversion: "They always felt that this expensive delivery service was an advantage over online providers, but they may have priced themselves out of a sale."

Impact on efficiency

In the face of high demand, Sun Delivery looks to be as flexible as possible in dealing both with retailers and consumers.

"We've had to look at all our procedures and increase efficiency and not just final mile — moving products across the country, warehousing," Boozer said. "This pandemic has helped us to be mindful of being flexible in all aspects of the operation."

Compliance with safety standards for masks, booties, gloves and sanitizing are the new normal for home delivery. RiteRouting's Nussbaum said failure to follow those protocols can be the biggest impact on efficiency.

"The minute you have a team not wearing PPE is the minute you get a call from a customer refusing delivery," said RiteRouting's Nussbaum.

Delivery networks have been under huge pressure from high demand, and carriers said consumers largely have been understanding about delays, as long as those are communicated.

"Consumer expectations have shifted during this time as



“The minute you have a team not wearing PPE is the minute you get a call from a customer refusing delivery.

Aaron Nussbaum
RiteRouting

demand for online orders increases," Carroll said. "Even if the shipment takes one to two days longer than usual, most consumers are aware that the alternative is not being able to get any furniture due to physical stores being closed."

Nussbaum and others said another impact of the pandemic is the importance of electronic documentation of delivery, which RiteRouting instituted around a year ago.

"That was a smart decision for us to go as paperless as possible," he said. "We already were using it at a high level, but through coronavirus, we decided it had to be mandatory."

FragilePAK is using proprietary technology to increase visibility of deliveries in progress for both retailers and the consumers.

Liguori said that, as more consumers opt to buy heavy goods such as furniture online, there's a lot of education and adjustment of expectations involved in delivery of such goods.

"In a delivery, you have some critical communications with the consignee, it's almost like an interview," FragilePAK's Liguori said. "We have to know if there are stairs to climb, if there's a dog in the house. You never had to worry about that receiving a small package from Amazon."

Some upsides

Geoff Chasin, president of NRX Logistics actually sees some positives regarding potential efficiency gains coming out of COVID-19.

"Traditionally, a problem we had was that loads weren't level throughout the week, but we don't see that now," Chasin said. "It used to be that people chose Saturdays as a popular day for delivery; ... and Thursdays were a typically slower day as choice for a delivery."

He added, "Now, with so many stay-at-home orders or people working from home or just choosing to be at home more, services can be provided efficiently throughout the week without having the peak delivery days and times."

"We think more people will work at home moving ahead, and that will flatten out the weekly load demand," Chasin continued. "It will level those weekly highs and lows, and that will help planning. We're still seeing more threshold deliveries, and that increases productivity."

He also noted changes in traffic patterns that helped NRX keep up with demand.

"In March when it was first declared a pandemic, traffic was almost non-existent. Service was not affected by traffic jams, construction slow-downs or other delays," he said, adding that any safety-related impacts simply must be managed. "Some of our commercial facilities are requiring safety protocols before coming on site. We've begun temperature checking and surveying people for potential health issues. Any time or cost associated with this far outweighs any negative impact that someone would want to mitigate."

Chasin also sees a better market for hiring drivers.

"Traditionally in the logistics industry, both driver and warehouse turnover rates were consistently high. During this pandemic, turnover went way down across the board," he said. "People with their jobs were largely staying put. ... We also saw a change in drivers who used to drive OTR to wanting to drive much shorter distances and stay closer to home." **■**