

DHL: handheld reader pivotal in mail order processing

Selektvracht uses the Heron™ handheld readers from Datalogic for its new DHL service points where customers pick-up and return packages.

'Not home', increasingly the delivery personnel from Selektvracht, a member of the DHL group, were confronted with this situation when attempting a parcel delivery.

Selektvracht Regional Manager Ko de Kort and his colleagues found a solution in the form of DHL Service Points where customers can personally pick-up and return their packages. Network participants make use of a web based application and a handheld reader to process the parcels.

After taking less than a year for preparations, 370 locations opened resulting in 75 percent of all households in the Netherlands being within four kilometers of a DHL Service Point. The Netherlands is the first European country where the DHL Service Points are active on a large scale. A further 50 pick-up points will be introduced later this year. During the setup of the pick-up and return points, Selektvracht works closely with companies such as Videoland, and more recently, Praxis.

"The beauty of the concept is the interaction that exists: many of the people that come in to pick up their package at Videoland also use the opportunity to rent a video for example. One Videoland location has gained 42 new customers since the service point opened in January," Ko de Kort explains. Another advantage is that most of the stores with a service point have extended opening times which means a customer can pick up his or her package until late in the evening. To be selected as a service point location, the enterprise must meet a few requirements - the location must be easily accessible, have sufficient opening hours, plenty of parking space and space to store the parcels. The Q8 fuel station in Gelderse Heerde has recently been designated a DHL Service Point.

Fuel station owner Daan Willems is satisfied with the concept. "I notice that people who come to pick a parcel up from us also tend to fill up with fuel or take a look around the bicycle shop that is next to the station." After a short period of learning the DHL system, Willems can now manage it well. "In the beginning, it took a little while to get used to the scanning and the returns meant quite a bit of paperwork, but from what I understand from the people at Selektvracht, that will improve."



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Green Light

Before the consumer can pick up their package within 24 hours at a service point, a whole series of processes have already been completed. When an order is placed with a mail order company, the parcel is first received in the Selektvracht warehouse in Utrecht where it is sorted and sent on to one of the local depots.

From there, the parcel is delivered to a service point somewhere in the country. At the service point, the customer specific barcode on the parcel is scanned. If the reader gives a green light, literally, then the DPST (Drop Point Shipping Tool) invokes a web based program from DHL and a message for the person who placed the order is created.

This message is sent to the customer via SMS, e-mail or even voicemail. The same applies for package returns. If a customer returns his package at a service point location, then the same process is used but in reverse. The package is once again scanned and via the DPST, the mail order company is notified that an order is being returned.

Trial Development

Before the DPST software was introduced into the service point concept, it was extensively tested at DHL in Praag. Once the program had proved itself, a fake service point location was created and a virtual test was done from the Netherlands. De Kort: "The problem was that we never had a barcode reader good enough to dispatch the parcels."

By coincidence, he discovered that Vierpool - a supplier of, among other things, barcode readers - was located close to the DHL Service Point headquarters in Utrecht. Vierpool was able to quickly supply De Kort with a suitable handheld reader from Datalogic - the Heron™. The test went so well that De Kort was ready to proceed immediately with Datalogic and Vierpool.

However, the headquarters of DHL demanded that first a so-called performance competition between different handheld reader manufacturers be completed.

After a hard race against another manufacturer, Datalogic finally came out on top and Vierpool was awarded a contract to deliver the first 400 Heron™ handheld readers. "The advantage of these multi-interface readers is that they are easy to connect to a PC via the USB-cable and therefore to the web based DPST program. Even better, the reader needs no external power source," explains Mario van Eijk, Key Account Manager for handheld readers at Datalogic.

The readers have an integrated double Tab- and Enter-function that breaks the barcode into pieces during reading. Ko de Kort states that the users of the service points are extremely satisfied with the readers. "It works perfectly and we have not yet had a failure."



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Growing Pains

With the start-up phase complete, it is now time to clear up the issues discovered during the initial release of the DPST program. De Kort: "There will soon be a second release of the DPST which includes improvements to the login process, the ability to do multiple returns and a reduction of a number of administrative tasks. The system is set up now that if, for example, someone comes with six parcels to return, he no longer has to sign for each one individually. The next step is that both the service point and the consumer will service MBK-companies since they too can deliver so-called cash and ad-hoc shipments at the DHL Service Points."

Ko de Kort has already offered a new idea to even better serve the customer during the processing of their order via a mail order company. "In the future we will probably send an SMS to the customer's mobile phone which will include the barcode for their package. At the service point, the scanner will then simply read the barcode directly from the mobile phone display."

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