

PRESS INFORMATION

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INNOVATION AIDS RAPID RESPONSE

BTC Activewear consolidates its distribution

Corporate clothing supplier BTC Activewear has developed an innovative warehousing and materials handling operation with help from Atlet. Conveyor systems and highly mobile shuttle buggies working with Atlet trucks have enabled the company to attain double digit growth by meeting demanding targets for high volumes and rapid response.

“Our aim is to deliver product next day before noon as this is the demand from the corporate promotional industry,” says Charles Grose, managing director at BTC Activewear. “Everything we have done here is designed to deliver on that commitment.”

BTC Activewear has grown from strength-to-strength over the past twenty years to become one of the major clothing distributors to the UK imprint industry. It stocks a comprehensive range of clothing and workwear brands. Everything from “cap to boot” is supplied to printers, embroiderers, promotional gift suppliers and corporate customers. The present business was formed when three similar companies managed by Charles Grose and colleagues Glenn Hyams and Steve Pope joined forces to present a new concept to the market. This combined extensive brand and range availability with value-added customer services and rapid delivery.

To meet this objective the warehouse has to be highly efficient. As part of its long term strategy BTC Activewear decided to consolidate a number of existing warehousing and distribution operations onto a single site. Here it could invest in the equipment and processes required to deliver the high performance needed to drive growth.

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A suitable site covering 10,200 sq metres (110,000 sq feet) was found adjacent to M6 junction 9 in Wednesbury on the northern side of Birmingham. The company retained four regional customer support sites strategically placed around the UK and complemented by an extensive team of sales and business development managers.

“We wanted to invest in the site, equipment and people that will help our business grow and maintain its market leading position,” says Charles Grose.

One of the challenges was to move from relatively small warehouses to a single integrated operation. Charles Grose visited the USA to see how similar businesses manage their warehouses. A supply chain consultant with experience in some of those operations visited the UK to advise on how best to manage the relocation and configure the new facility for maximum efficiency and throughput. The company also analysed its complete range to identify the fastest and slowest moving lines so that it could make its plans based on hard evidence. Like many businesses in other sectors it was clear that a relatively few items represented the majority of the throughput and hence the picking requirement.

“We looked at every aspect of how to move, pick and pack,” says Charles Grose. “We analysed stock to see what moves fast and slow, optimised our SKUs along the 80/20 rule and based the layout of the warehouse around this.”

The result is a warehouse configured into three separate but adjacent and inter-related zones. In the centre is a bulk picking area which accommodates the fastest moving and highest volume lines such as plain tee shirts. Picking in this area is undertaken at ground and first level with overhead replenishment stock transferred to pick faces when needed by one of the company’s three Atlet Forte reach trucks. Items that have been picked are transferred to consolidation and despatch by a conveyor that runs along the front of the racked area.

To one side of the bulk picking area is a very narrow aisle high bay picking zone that stores thousands of different lower volume stock lines. Picking on all nine levels in this area is undertaken using four high level pickers from the Atlet OP range.

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Staff collect pick lists from the end of the aisle and visit each location in sequence to retrieve the required items. These are then taken to one of nine dedicated bays at the front end of the open side of the racking, facing the centre of the warehouse, where they are placed with details of the order number.

The items are then collected by warehouse operatives who transfer them to order consolidation areas for packing and despatch. The design of this zone provides an optimum combination of storage density and intensive utilisation of the high level order picking trucks which spend a very large proportion of their time on productive work. This helps to ensure the warehouse can meet the demanding targets for order fulfilment, throughput and picking rates that help BTC Activewear deliver on its commitments to customers.

The final racking zone in the warehouse is on the opposite side of the high throughput central area and comprises traditional palletised loads of items that can be called off to replenish both the main picking areas. This area is normally worked by the Atlet Forte reach trucks but the high level order pickers are also used to handle incoming stock into storage locations before 1pm, in time for the day's picking to start. The trucks' ability to place and retrieve pallets to either side of the aisle is vital to this part of the operation.

BTC Activewear had developed the concept for the warehouse before selecting the trucks. It chose Atlet after evaluating equipment from a number of potential suppliers. The most important consideration was the performance of the Atlet OP high level order picker trucks because these are central to the overall operation.

"Atlet outperformed other trucks we tried," says Charles Grose. "Their sales team clearly understood our requirements and worked with us to ensure we had the support we needed, when we needed it, to make the transition to the new operation."

The company originally envisaged a certain level of business from day one but such was the success of the operation that it soon required more trucks to cope. The result is that it currently has four OP high level order pickers, three Forte reach trucks and four Presto PLP ride-on pallet transporters used for loading delivery vehicles at one of the warehouse's eight loading bays.

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Atlet was able to supply short term rental trucks to fill the gap until the new machines could be delivered.

Planning the operation went well beyond the provision of warehouse trucks. During one of his visits to the USA Charles Grose saw some small electric carts shuttling small batches of items around a warehouse. It turned out these were modified stand-on golf buggies and the idea made so much sense in terms of reducing the time and distance staff need to walk that BTC Activewear decided to import some for itself. As far as anyone knows this is the only warehouse in the UK with this type of equipment.

The warehouse operates from 8am to 10pm five days a week. Incoming products arrive on paper pallets that are widely used for shipping by clothing manufacturers and must be transferred to conventional wooden pallets. This is done using a small electric counterbalance lift truck with a special slip attachment. Incoming product is normally put away during the morning to clear the operation for the intensive picking that peaks during the afternoon. On one of the busiest days the warehouse shipped almost 80,000 items to customers in 1500 separate cartons. The business is essentially offering same day response to deliver by noon the following day. In practice the efficiency of the operation means that final orders can be accepted relatively late in the day and still be processed and readied for the carrier's final collection at 9pm.

BTC Activewear took a positive view on sustainability as part of its long term planning. The company insists that suppliers use recyclable packaging which it shreds and compresses on site using its own equipment. This helps keep the warehouse very tidy, saves overall costs, reduces storage requirements and, incidentally, generates a steady revenue stream for the business when the packaging is sold to the recycling provider.

The first year of operations has been a great success and the business continues to grow. There is room to develop the site for the foreseeable future, either by extending the building or adding more levels on top of the racking to the full 14 metres (45 feet) height.

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