

The gloves are on

Quality of service, customer satisfaction and supply chain efficiency are essentials when it comes to specialist distribution of high-end goods, says **Martin Smith**, director of Nightfreight's Pacemaker business

These days, consumers want more than just a smile with their service. With high-ticket items like dining sets and upholstery firmly on the 'non-essential' goods list, retailers are having to offer the highest standards of convenient delivery to turn interest into a sale.

The trouble is, even major chains don't tend to have the transport resources to deliver that keenly awaited bed or sofa to the customer within a convenient window of time on a specified day. And even if they do, consumers may well want it carried to the right room and assembled in situ – and why not? They're paying, after all.

WHITE-GLOVE SERVICE

For any retailer daunted by the prospect of meeting those exacting demands, Martin

Smith, director of Nightfreight, believes he has an answer. The company's white-glove delivery service, Pacemaker, has been operating for 30 years now and services the delivery needs of House of Fraser, John Lewis and Natuzzi, among others.

So what's the idea? Martin explains that bringing an expensive product into a customer's home is a sensitive job and that having trained specialist staff carrying it out is a big advantage if you are retailing furniture at the mid- to top-end of the market.

He says that Nightfreight's services were engaged by House of Fraser during the economic boom of the 1980s, prompting

a move from warehouse-to-warehouse transport into home deliveries.

"We realised, having worked with quite a number of people, that the niche market we wanted to be in was at the higher-value end. The average order value for us is about £1,500," he says, "And some of the orders are up to £40,000."

TIME FACTOR

The value of the products being transported means that a number of strict objectives and specialist capabilities have been added to the Pacemaker service, says Martin. "I think that customers who are shopping

at that level within department stores expect a certain level of service. They don't expect to be told that the goods will arrive on Sunday next week. They're generally busy people and they need to be able to specify a three-hour window," he says.

"More importantly, everybody advertises a three-hour window or a four-hour window. But it needs to actually get there during that window."

HOME IMPROVEMENTS

Another consideration that hasn't always formed part of delivery services in the past is what happens once the furniture has been brought to a customer's doorstep.

"What they're expecting as well is for the delivery staff not just to turn up and dump it on the doorstep," Martin says.

He adds that Pacemaker staff have a lengthy checklist of procedures that they have



The Pacemaker fleet at work

to observe when they go out on a job, and that their role takes them into the most cherished spaces in a person's home – meaning that attention to detail is all important.

"It's a difficult job. You're sending them out on 10 deliveries a day and every delivery is a new customer. They're going into customer's homes and they have to be aware of what they say and be careful not to do any damage or leave dirty boot marks on a nice white rug, for example."

"We have a book of procedures for guys and when they arrive the first thing they do after introducing themselves is take a walk along the route where they're going and perform a risk assessment. Pictures need to come off walls and they may even have to take a door off to get the product in."

Effectively, Martin says the service must do the kind of jobs that are normally the province of high-end removals staff. Nonetheless, it's clear that the convenience this affords the consumer – when carried out correctly – can make all the difference. Electronic communications, including

Skilled repairs at Pacemaker



Specialist inspection skills



Key client: Natuzzi

online order tracking, plus text and phone updates on delivery day, keep customers in the loop. "The whole thing about it is customer service – to try and leave the customer with a pleasant experience, so they will go back and use our client."

SPECIALIST SKILLS

Another feature of the service which is especially useful in the furniture sector is the fact that Pacemaker retains a team of trained cabinet makers. These are put to work in cases where manufacturers want to offer the consumer vouchsafes for the quality of the product from its creation all the way to the doorstep. Pacemaker's involvement means minor flaws picked up in transit can be quickly dealt with.

"We unwrap and inspect every item and where things need to be re-worked, we re-work them in our warehouse. We then re-pack those items and will make the delivery arrangement with the customer and will go out and effect the delivery. By doing that,

we're keeping the refusals to an absolute minimum."

Although Martin says the service is designed to be flexible enough to work for a variety of clients, it needs an input of around 20 deliveries a week to make it cost-effective for everyone involved.

When asked how the company's record stands, in terms of client satisfaction, at

the 30-year mark of its history, Martin says:

"I think our record is good – that's not to be complacent about it and we're always looking at processes for continual improvement." ■

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House of Fraser also uses the service

