Cleaning up the Database
By Jason Bader

Over the years, I have had the opportunity to work with hundreds of organizations in several vertical markets. If I can say this one thing about all of them, they each have their own unique language when it comes to describing the products that rest on the shelves. In fact, that uniqueness can show itself just as easily in the same vertical. Now this wasn't intentional, rather it was as a result of people trying to complete a task in the absence of a standard convention on playbook. Couple that with the character limitations of legacy systems and you have product descriptions that hardly pass for 3rd grade English.

Because of these limitations, companies have adopted their own set of truncations and abbreviations. From my past, I recall the original standard being the first 3 letters of the manufacturer name followed by either the manufacturer part number or a generic description. For some reason, perhaps a change in software, we started using a larger piece of the manufacturer name. But there wasn't a standard. It really depended on who added the item to the database. As the years went on, our database was filled with a mixture of conventions used to describe the item for sale. To further the confusion, this was just the item code. We were given several more lines of description to play with. Talk about an opportunity for chaos. Is this resonating with anyone?

Along comes the internet and the desire to sell things online. It sounded so easy. Put up some pretty pictures representing product, figure out how to put the order in a virtual shopping cart and somehow accept payment via credit card. Stop and think about this for a minute. Here we are in the 1990s getting excited about this silent sales vehicle that would totally transform the way distributors went to market. What we soon realized is the way we described products was not easy for people to understand. We had build our item codes and product descriptions to serve ourselves, not the masses who were hoping to attract. In many situations, we created elaborate translation databases from a web friendly description to our self-serving attempts at language. Why didn't we just fix the underlying problem in the first place?

Here we are, over 20 years later, and many companies are still struggling to clean up their databases. In my travels, it is very rare for me to come across a company that has a clean database built to serve both internal and external customers. In fact, I believe that this is one of the very reasons privately held legacy distribution businesses struggle with building an online presence. It just seems to be too daunting a task to choose a convention and modify everything in the product universe.

If it aint broke, why fix it? Many distributors have successfully operated for decades using a less then desirable item database filled with the half-hearted ramblings of keyboard strokes past. Commerce continues to happen. CSRs find the items the customers want, create the orders and our material handles fulfill the request. In spite of themselves, distributors continue to survive and thrive in this chaos of characters. That being said, how much money is slipping through the cracks because of the need to mask and translate these instructions for order completion. Just because our team members have learned to overcome this deficiency, should we just keep turning a blind eye? What's so great about e-commerce? Who wants to deal with the unwashed masses of credit card toting consumers anyway? Apparently, there is a bald guy up in Seattle that doesn't think they are too bad.

Online sales occur within the B to B marketplace as well. Like it or not, your customers are buying your products online from other outlets. It may not be a large part of your revenue being stolen by the tech savvy competitor, but it will continue if left unchecked. "But my business is based on relationships." "I

am in the service business." "My customers need products too quickly to shop online." I have heard all of these justifications before. While these statements may have been true in the past, their validity will certainly not carry the same weight in the future. Why let the propeller-heads win if you don't have to? I am really not trying to talk you into e-commerce. What I am trying to convey is removing a barrier to future growth.

Cleaning up your item database is not just an e-commerce play. How long does it take for new team members to find products in your system? Granted, most of them start out in material handling and don't enter orders; but aren't they trying to read the documents produced by your database. Grab a pick ticket sometime. Is this really written in plain English? Without the decades of tribal knowledge you possess, can you really equate an item code to something desired by your customer base? How easy is it for a new CSR to add an item to a customer order? Can they find things on the fly, or do they have to jot it down and complete the order later? How efficient is that?

So now that I have given a couple of arguments in favor of cleaning up the database, how should you go about it? I am firm believer that you can only eat an elephant one bite at a time. The project needs to be broken down into manageable tasks. Start with the item naming convention. If your products are primarily branded, use the primary manufacturer name and part number. This will help with everything from order picking to purchasing. Believe it or not, your customers will appreciate the simplicity as they receive items against your packing slip. If your products are more generic in nature, adopt a universal naming convention similar to other companies you see online. Growing up in the fastener business, a "nut" was commonly referred to something that was attached to a threaded object. Go for the easiest name first. The item descriptions can take the generic to the specific.

When creating the lines of description, think in terms of macro to micro. Similar to the comments about generic items, I like to start with the universal name for a product, then continue adding descriptive words to narrow the field. As an example, let's say that you stock an 80 tooth 5 ¼" circular saw blade. I might describe it like this: Blade, Circular, 5-1/4, 80 Tooth. In the second description, I might say: Fine Cut or For Wood. In descriptions 3 and 4, I might give specific instructions to the material handling team. For example: 10 per box or Yellow Face. For me, the first and second lines were meant to be outward facing and additional lines of description were meant to be inward instructions.

Regardless of the convention you adopt, future input must follow the same logic. This is where so many companies have failed in the past. Give some real thought on how you want your item naming standard to look like. Will it stand the test of time? Once established, create a checklist for adding new items to the database. This may not work perfectly when you change suppliers and do a mass upload; but it will definitely help with the randomly added products.

Whether your plans include a migration to e-commerce or you simply want to create greater operating efficiency, I would highly encourage you to carve out some time to clean up the database. If I can be of service, or you just want another opinion, my door is always open. Good luck.