



Cold Chain Demand Soars Thanks to This Sweet Treat

For some time, refrigerated transport and storage was a relatively simple aspect of the supply chain. That doesn't mean it wasn't challenging to manage - it most certainly always has been. But it involved maintaining temperature-controlled systems, and sometimes even designing such systems in a much simpler manner.

Goods had to be moved from location to location while remaining in highly regulated temperature settings. For example, you cannot transport meat safely without it staying frozen and stored at a certain temperature. If the meat thaws because of a temperature change, the food becomes contaminated, which is a health hazard. Even so, it was always primarily about keeping food cool until it reached a distributor, partner or drop-off, at which point it became the next person's responsibility.

This pass-off is no longer the way of things because the so-called "cold chain" is seeing demand grow, which calls for items to be delivered closer to the consumer.

Why Is the "Cold Chain" Evolving?

Consider frozen pizza. With conventional responsibilities, parties along the supply chain, including distributors, would have to ensure the food stays fresh and frozen throughout its entire journey. That means packaging and transporting it in climate-controlled settings - nothing more, nothing less. Generally, the pizza could be stored in its original packaging and simply placed in a refrigerated vehicle.

As the goods move from location to location, they're exchanged from one cold area to another, keeping the food fresh. From there, it's passed on to distributors or partners. Then, customers purchase it from a store, and it becomes their responsibility to maintain the appropriate conditions.

Throw a service like Amazon's Fresh into the mix - or even a pre-packaged meal-planning provider such as HelloFresh. Suddenly, it becomes important to not only transport the items in climate-controlled settings but also deliver them to the customer with the appropriate packaging. That pizza, for instance, must stay frozen and chilled even in environments where there's no climate-control system present - like the customer's doorstep.

It's not just about items like frozen pizza either. A variety of foods are now being handled this way. For example, ice cream in artisan, novel and organic flavors is now being shipped directly to the customer's doorstep, and it must stay fresh and frozen indefinitely. This new trend coupled with innovative technologies is helping to change the face of the supply chain/cold chain. You may be surprised to know that this movement is largely being encouraged by a growing demand for one particular sweet treat - ice cream.

IoT and Smart Monitoring Are the Future of the Supply Chain

Big data, advanced analytics, machine learning and AI all certainly play a role in the ever-evolving supply chain of today, but the real driver is the internet of things (IoT).

IoT alone will enhance logistics and monitoring by providing a bevy of data and insights about operations, hardware and more. Consider a transport vehicle equipped with IoT sensors. Logistics managers can review the local climate and how that affects storage conditions, but they can also stay informed about interior temperatures, package conditions, unexpected transport delays and additional problems. If there's a leak in the storage unit, for instance, sensors will be able to detect it by measuring temperature changes.

Process cooling and similar climate-control techniques are what keeps temperatures low to preserve food. But traditionally, there are fewer monitoring tools available that are at least equal to the same capabilities as IoT and smart internet-enabled sensors. Such devices can transmit real-time data about what's happening with items all along the supply chain.

RFID tags or unique identifiers can be used to track goods throughout every step of the trip. This process would afford both more oversight and enhanced controls, especially in the food and beverage industry.

The CDC estimates that 48 million people in the U.S. are affected by foodborne illness every year. In around 128,000 of such cases, the victims require hospitalization. Many instances can be prevented by keeping a closer eye on goods as they move along the chain and recalling any that may have been contaminated.

The Ultimate Sweet Treat: Ice Cream

Several companies such as Haagen-Daz, Baskin-Robbins, Halo Top, Beenie's, Graeter's and even Amazon are now providing their customers with on-demand ice cream. Imagine sitting at home in your PJ's and ordering a new flavor through a mobile app or online. Less than an hour later your doorbell rings and there is your new treat, sitting on your front porch or doorstep.

Believe it or not, the scenario does not describe a lofty future - it describes what's happening right now. It's exactly what these companies - and many others - are going for. Beyond ice cream, there are many other types of cold produce and foods that are being shipped the same way. Before long, you'll never have to leave your house for food or groceries again, and these new changes in the cold chain are to thank for that.

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