

Milking the benefits of voice

A photographic look inside a Hood milk production and distribution facility



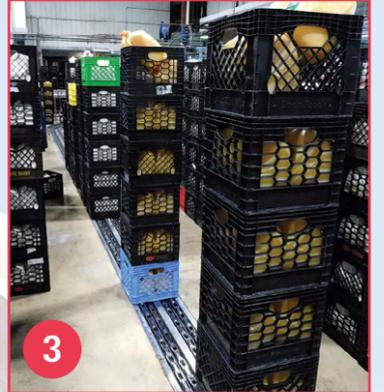
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◀ If you live in New England, you know the name Hood. For more than 170 years, the privately held company has distributed its dairy and beverage products throughout the region. But in recent years, the company has expanded beyond its New England roots. Today, Hood is a national brand, with 12 manufacturing plants across the country, including the Concord, N.H., milk production facility shown here.



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▲ The Concord plant has its own extrusion equipment to produce plastic milk jugs. Here, the jugs are filled with fresh milk from local farms.



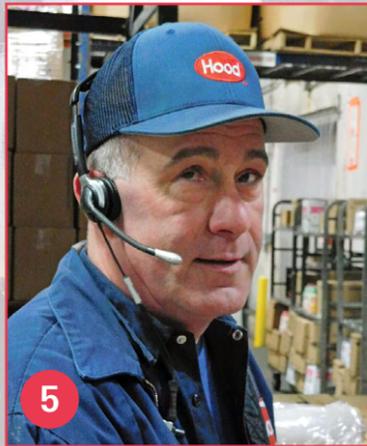
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▲ From production, crates of milk are stacked and moved onto a chain conveyor embedded in the floor for transport to a nearby warehouse. About 300 stock-keeping units (SKUs) are housed in the 25,000-square-foot storage facility, with 50 to 70 SKUs picked for a typical delivery route.



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◀ Since milk has a short shelf life, order processing at Hood is a high-speed operation. Once it leaves the farm, milk will be on store shelves within 48 to 72 hours.



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◀ In the past, workers at the Concord facility picked orders according to paper lists. But paper proved less than optimal in an operation where the floor is washed down at regular intervals, resulting in soggy—and sometimes unreadable—lists. Now, Hood uses the Lydia voice system from Ehrhardt + Partner Solutions. Workers receive their instructions through headsets and confirm picks via a built-in microphone, with only minimal training required.



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▲ Supervisors can monitor activity on the floor from a control room overlooking the warehouse. The Lydia system allows managers to track individual order pickers' performance in real time, enabling them to balance workload and ensure shipping schedules are met.

▶ A worker moves a stack of cases onto the chain conveyor according to directions from the Lydia system. Hood was able to customize the Lydia software's dialogue to add product codes and date codes, which assures accurate selection, proper product rotation, and traceability.



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▲ The Lydia system's hands-free operation is a particular advantage in an operation like this, where order pickers must handle heavy cases of milk. About half the items picked here are labeled as Hood products, while the other half are sold under private-label store brands.



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◀ The voice system directs pickers to arrange cases of products needed for an order in stacks of six. (Some of the stacks will contain just one product, while others will contain mixed SKUs.) The worker uses a hook to drag the stack of crates onto the chain conveyor, greatly reducing the amount of lifting required.



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◀ In addition to the milk that's packaged on site, the Concord facility distributes items produced at other plants. These are delivered to the facility and stored in racks in a separate warehouse. The Lydia voice system directs the picking of these products onto pallets, which are then secured with stretch wrap before being sent to shipping.

▶ Crates of products from the main warehouse and pallets from the rack warehouse come together in shipping. The stacks of crates are removed from the floor conveyor and placed onto dollies that are rolled onto Hood's delivery trucks (the company operates its own fleet). About 50 trailer loads leave this facility daily.



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▲ The trucks deliver products throughout the Boston area, New Hampshire, Maine, and Vermont. To avoid the need for costly special deliveries to correct for wrong orders (as it is, the trucks consume 8,000 gallons of fuel a day), the Concord team must get orders right. Since Hood moved to Lydia voice, order accuracy has increased to 99 percent-plus. This has eliminated the need for a piece count before shipping, which was standard procedure with the old paper-based system.