

## 10 STEPS for receiving and breaking down a produce load

The old saying that “failing to prepare is preparing to fail” applies so well to receiving a produce delivery. If the right preparation doesn’t occur, a delivery may very well go something like this: the receiving dock and cooler are a mess, with new pallets of produce crowded together with little regard to temperature or accessibility. The result is handling the produce numerous times, the cold chain

compromised, damaged product, misrotation. Translation: Higher-than-necessary labor dollars, higher shrink, lost sales and squandered gross profit dollars. But I digress. Properly done, receiving and breaking down a produce delivery needn’t be difficult, but it is a vital step in ideal produce department management. Here are a few thoughts on the process. *pmg*

—Armand Lobato

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**1 PREPARE THE RECEIVING AREA** Knowing your delivery window, make sure that the produce department is stocked well enough to devote time to receive the new produce delivery. Prepare the receiving area and cooler by consolidating existing product, stacking empty pallets to send back to your distribution center, discarding all empty cartons and sweeping the floor of all debris.

**2 SECURE NECESSARY EQUIPMENT** Make sure that all necessary electric forklifts and jacks are available for the time period that you need them to unload and put away the new produce load. Also, be certain that these jacks are fully charged and operable by the time your delivery is expected.

**3 ENSURE ADEQUATE LABOR** Ideally, two or three clerks should be available to receive and put away a produce load. Depending on the piece count and difficulty of the space in the receiving area, you can expect this task to take one

to several hours, depending on the skill and experience level of the clerks. Since many produce deliveries provide for multiple operating days, loads are generally large enough to account for a consistent labor plan to receive and break down, though few chains use a set formula to determine how long it will take based on piece count and skill and experience of their personnel. Sometimes more hours may be necessary for the task, especially when the produce load precedes an especially busy period, such as during especially heavy volume weekends or holidays, or for special circumstances such as multiple loads, straight-load drops, store remodels or overnight deliveries.

**4 KNOW WHAT TO EXPECT** Is the expected truck a few hundred pieces or a thousand? Several pallets of a single item, or multiple mixed pallets that need broken down? This will determine the degree of difficulty of the expected load. If possible, get a printout of what is expected. Then the receiving team can plan for optimum efficiency.

**5 A PLACE FOR EVERYTHING...** When the truck arrives, the receiving clerks can put the load away in the exact desired area of the backroom or cooler, minimizing additional handling. Thus, as full pallets get “parked” in designated spaces, pallets that need broken down can be arranged or staged in adjacent areas so they can be broken down in the desired order. Ideally, non-refrigerated product (bananas, potatoes, tomatoes or onions) should never be placed in the cooler, while high-respiration, highly perishable items (leafy greens, mushrooms and berries) should be immediately placed inside the cooler.

**6 WORK AS A TEAM - SAFETY FIRST** Help each other as the need arises and especially when putting the load away. Some produce pallets may need an added steadying hand to ensure the pallet transitions off the truck safely. Always ask for help when needed to avoid injury, slip-and-falls or during times requiring heavy lifting.

**7 PRODUCT CARE AND HANDLING** Every item has its care and handling nuances. A skid of watermelon may only need to be unloaded and parked, while a pallet of bananas should be handled carefully, immediately de-lidded and air-stacked. When breaking down pallets of mixed items, consider that when finished, clerks will need safe and easy access to product. Also, stack product in categories whenever possible — citrus in one area, apples in another area, organics separately stored and never comingled with conventional — separated by each variety, pack or size, and so that clerks can easily identify which cartons are which. For example, keep the stack of bosc pears distinguishable from the bartlett stack, with the shipper information clearly visible.



Carefully handle every case of produce to avoid damage, and faithfully rotate stock so that you are following the FIFO (first in, first out) method to minimize shrink.

**8 CLEAN UP AND CODE-DATE** When the load has been properly put away, stack off empty pallets, pick up and discard all empty cartons and other debris, and sweep and mop the floor of any standing water and ice. Following your chain’s guidelines, mark or otherwise code-date what you have put away for easy reference.

**9 CHECK OFF INVOICE** With the load properly handled and neatly put away, take the time to check off the load, comparing the invoice line-by-line with what was billed against what you received. Note any shortages or other discrepancies for the produce manager so he or she can report these for important credit adjustments.

**10 TAKE A BREAK** Nothing beats a neat, clean and organized produce back room. Get a cup of hot coffee and perhaps a doughnut or two and reflect upon a job well done.

Putting a load away is an important first step in any produce department. Properly done, this sets the pace so that clerks can be as productive as possible, in a safe and organized environment. Meanwhile, when it comes time for the produce manager to write a new order, they can easily identify what is on hand, what is selling and how much is needed. Preparing to properly receive and break down a load will require a little additional time up front, but the investment is one that really pays dividends.