MECALUX

Case study: Rent a Book
Back to school warehousing

Country: Belgium

Rent a Book, a Belgian company that rents and sells textbooks online, has rolled out Mecalux's Easy WMS warehouse management system at its warehouse in Enghien (Belgium). Every day, the number of online orders it puts together keeps growing, exceeding one thousand at present. With the help of the Easy WMS, the company has streamlined its supply chain processes, with an emphasis on perfecting order picking, improving service and eliminating errors.

Textbook rental

As a new school year begins, families spend large amounts of money on books, not to mention the time it takes to pick them up from bookshops. Rent a Book is a very innovative initiative created because many parents want to save both time and money.

Founded in 2013, Rent a Book is a Belgian company that rents out and sells textbooks. Initially, it only sold books used by students at the Collège Saint-Augustin school (in the city of Enghien). However, since 2016, it has broadened its product catalogue and now collaborates with educational centres in virtually every province in Belgium.

According to Grégory Bastieans, project manager at Rent a Book, *"we have experienced very strong growth in recent years and, by 2019, expect to double our sales volume."* Despite being a hit in Belgium, international market expansion is not the next chapter in its business strategy.

Rent a Book is a very simple, user-friendly service. All one must do is connect to the website, select the region the school is located in, the school's name, the child's year, the subject and, lastly, the book to be bought or rented. Books are rented at 35% less than those found in other Belgian bookstores and delivered straight to your home before classes begin.

WMS improves picking

The company has a very small 450 m² warehouse in Enghien, which distributes all its books to customers nationwide. *"Before we kept track of orders with a pen and paper. The main problem we faced was the mistakes we made. Our error rate went up to 3% sometimes,"* Bastieans said. A 3% error rate may seem minuscule, but it comes at a very high cost for the company. Reverse logistics starts when a customer receives the wrong book. He or she will contact Rent a Book and ask to return the wrongly delivered item and request the correct title. *"In short, a huge waste of time and an enormous financial cost,"* added the company's project manager.

Rent a Book's business is very seasonal with a very brief, intense sales periods: in just three months a year (between July and September), it records almost all online purchases, with peaks of up to 1,000 orders/day. That means operators work against the clock to make sure that books are available to parents before classes begin.

Getting the job done requires good organisation of the entire supply chain: on the one hand, having the right merchandise at the right time and, on the other, coordinating operators to prepare orders as quickly as possible.

Faced with this situation, the company decided to deploy a warehouse management system (WMS) to improve order fulfilment. *"We don't carry a massive stock, since we only manage 1,700 different SKUs. So, we didn't need the WMS to control our inventory. Rather, it needed to cope with the growing number of orders we must prepare on a daily basis,"* admitted Bastieans.

Installing a WMS in a warehouse is a major decision for any company because it directly affects business performance. For this reason, the Rent a Book project man-

ager wanted to be completely sure before opting for the Easy WMS, the WMS developed by Mecalux: *"I did some browsing online and got in touch with Mecalux because I thought it was a reliable, professional company. They showed me how the software worked and I outlined what my business needed. And, they reassured me that Easy WMS would adapt to my business. Ten days later, the Mecalux team paid a visit to our facilities in Enghein and we had a long, detailed meeting in which they analysed our requirements thoroughly. When I had the deal in my hands, I*

knew that it matched everything we were looking for and, plus, the budget held no surprises."

Subsequently, a Mecalux technical team came to work in the Rent a Book warehouse for two weeks to install and configure the system. *"The system's deployment was very successful,"* Bastieans mentioned.

The process took place in June, when the company's website is closed and no orders are processed. *"We had enough time to*

> ## Grégory Bastieans
> ### Project Manager at Rent a Book
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> *"Mecalux's Easy WMS is perfectly adapted to our company. Since installing it, we have shortened our order fulfilment time and decreased many errors, which has lowered our after-sales service costs. What we value most about this system is its responsiveness and flexibility, as it suits our warehouse and our products."*

work with the technical team and familiarise ourselves with this new tool. When the technicians headed off, we had an operational software moulded to our needs," he added.

The operators have adapted to this software very easily, in the words of Grégory Bastieans, *"for three main reasons: we had someone from Mecalux explaining how it works; on our end, we were very eager to learn it; and, more importantly, because Easy WMS is very user-friendly."*

It is a very intuitive system, which is why the newly added staff only needs a short training session before they can start working with the software.

Operators use RF devices to talk to the WMS in real time and receive and confirm orders. This system expedites their work since they simply need to carry out the WMS's instructions.

Operational control
Easy WMS interacts with all in-warehouse processes to optimise staff workflows and to prepare as many orders as possible.

Receipt of goods
"We don't have a specific reception area, so the WMS finds a location for each item as the lorry unloads," Bastieans said. During the three busiest months, each day 600 pallets arrive with more than 500 individual books sent out by the five vendors Rent a Book works with. Receptions are blind, i.e. orders turn up without any prior notification from Rent a Book's ERP to Easy WMS. An appropriate action plan is necessary to avoid errors and to manage these products' arrival, which consists of each book's identification through the radio frequency device. Thus, the WMS can now register it in the system.

Once all products have been identified, Easy WMS assigns a location to each book considering its reference number (educational centre, subject, course, etc.), whether it is a textbook or a dictionary, for rent or sale, and its demand level.

Storage of goods
Rent a Book stores books in two different ways: in plastic containers on pallets that are deposited on pallet racks or directly on shelving for picking.

The positioning on one shelf or another depends on various criteria such as the size of the books. While 90% of the titles come in A4 format, some atlases, dictionaries or readers come in other sizes. The system centralises the same SKUs in the same locations. Before installing the Easy WMS, the company performed a visual check of the SKUs, which was impractical and prone to errors. According to Bastieans, *"It's much easier now. We connect straight into Easy WMS, enter the reference number we need and the system specifies its location. It's very easy to check on the status of our SKUs."*

Rent a Book has deployed the Easy WMS with the objective of increasing productivity in order prep and enabling the organisation of 1,700 distinct SKUs

Order preparation

The ERP tells the WMS which orders to distribute, and Easy WMS then instructs the operators to prepare these orders and send them to the dispatch area.

Operators prepare orders by waves, i.e., multiple orders at the same time during a single run through the warehouse. Following Easy WMS's cues, they roam the warehouse locating the SKUs that comprise each order. Afterward, they sort them appropriately as they pick the items.

For this purpose, the warehouse uses hand carts with twelve different slots (each corresponds to an order). Easy WMS assigns a cart to an operator to prepare the twelve orders simultaneously and designs a route through the warehouse to streamline their movements when locating products one by one.

"Thanks to this system, the operator does not have to worry about where to look for each product. Instead, Easy WMS tells them where to go and how much to collect. Orders are so accurate that errors cannot occur during order preparation," Rent a Book's project manager reported.

Easy WMS has helped Rent a Book revitalise its order preparation: between 40,000 and 45,000 orders. Most of the activity took place at the beginning of September. In the first two weeks, 25,000 orders were placed. Each of these consists of between four and eight items.

Dispatch of orders

Operators move completed orders to the consolidation and packaging area. There, they are packed into boxes according to the Easy WMS instructions.

Mecalux has launched the Multi Carrier Shipping Software module, an extension of Easy WMS used to customise the packaging to suit each different need. This module also allows the WMS to communicate with Bpost, the shipping agency that distributes its orders.

Easy WMS gives precise instructions to operators on how to prepare orders, making the process error-free.
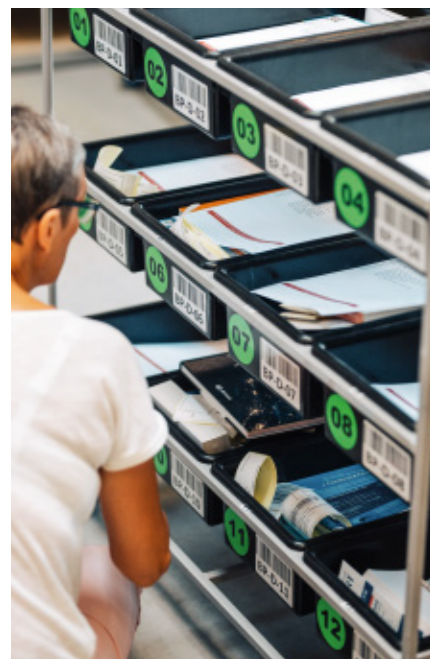
Before running the Multi Carrier Shipping Software, Rent a Book operators had to print each order's labels one at a time off Bpost's website and then stick them on the boxes. *"This operation would bog down a person's entire work day. Plus, they might make mistakes when printing the labels,"* Bastieans said.

Installing Multi Carrier Shipping has marked a major change for Rent a Book and, as its project manager pointed out, *"we have stepped up our dispatch speed. As soon as an operator completes a wave of orders, they automatically request Bpost reports, delivery notes and labels be printed."*

This system monitors how many packages each shipment comprises and notifies the Bpost carrier. Additionally, the Multi Carrier Shipping Software creates and verifies each shipment's tracking code. Bastieans noted that *"The Bpost interface is highly secure and the customer receives an email from the courier saying it has shipped their package, as well as a tracking number they can check."*

Last Mile deliveries, i.e., delivering an order to the end customer, is also decisive for Rent a Book because it impacts buyer satisfaction. The customer receives an email when their order has arrived at click & collect point. If they have not picked it up after two days, they receive another email as a reminder. For door-to-door deliveries, the customer can provide instructions on how they want to receive the package (at a drop off point, with a neighbour, etc.). *"Truth told, since Mecalux's WMS has been in place, we have seen fewer returns than in previous years,"* Bastieans pointed out. Although the bulk of Rent a Book's shipments are boxed parcels, from time to time it ships a few pallet loads (principally to schools). Easy WMS has been customised to create a label that specifies the school and student.

The automated management of the warehouse has greatly reduced the number of errors and, ultimately, returns

From manual to automated management

Easy WMS's extensive supervision of all Rent a Book operations has led to many advantages for this company:

Flexibility. The system has been totally shaped to the unique way this business runs, with season-based product vending (between July and September).

Controlling goods. The WMS takes inventory in real time so the company can plan operator tasks in advance and provide the right service to its customers.

Exact, high-speed picking. Using the WMS has improved turnaround times and reduced any chance of errors from manual management.

Shipment monitoring. Thanks to Multi Carrier Shipping, the WMS interfaces with the transport agency to coordinate deliveries of customers' orders.

Workflow management. Easy WMS optimises product and information flows.

Profitability. The company has leveraged all warehouse resources and, as a result, has achieved a quick return on investment.

"We are not only satisfied with the system but also with the after-sales service and support. This was a priority for us, because we believe that any incidence requires a swift response," Bastieans said.

The warehouse and the WMS of Rent a Book work uninterrupted throughout the night to attend to the growing demands of customers on very specific days.

"When we have an issue, whatever it is, the Mecalux technical team solves it quickly. Then, it explains what happened so we don't repeat the same mistake twice. Plus, team members are very friendly and always helpful. I think, when it comes to software, you can't feel left out in the

dark. So, now if we have a problem or want to improve something, someone from Mecalux will give us a hand and provide us with information," Bastieans explained.

In summary, Easy WMS has greatly improved all our in-warehouse operations at Rent a Book, increasing productivity, reducing errors and speeding up order prep. The WMS is built in such a way that, during these three months of non-stop work, the company can achieve excellent results and, simultaneously, meet new business challenges.
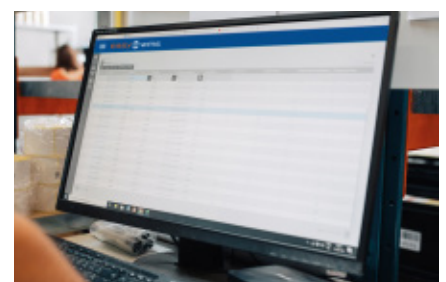
Advantages for Rent a Book

- **Product traceability:** the WMS knows the up-to-date status of all products at all times. It identifies SKUs as they enter the warehouse and assigns a location based on their demand level.

- **More efficient order picking:** Easy WMS guides operators through the preparation of between 40,000 and 45,000 orders during the three-month warehouse activity period.

- **Seasonal business:** Rent a Book runs a seasonal business, where peaks in demand skyrocket prior to the start of Belgium's school year. The WMS has been tailored to this particular situation and can meet demand at precisely the right time.
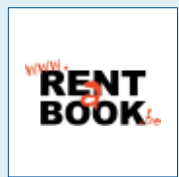
Technical data

Warehouse surface area	450 m²
No. of stored SKUs	1,700
No. of prepped orders	40,000–45,000 between July and September
No. of lines per order	4–8
Management software	Easy WMS and Multi Carrier Shipping module

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