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Holt Logistics adapting to post-pandemic climate, keeps focus on customer service

By

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When the COVID-19 pandemic struck three years ago, it threw normal business operations at ports for a loop.

Some goods, such as discretionary items, lagged in demand, while others that were deemed necessities saw a spike. Additionally, many ports experienced unprecedented backlogs and delays.

As a result, port operators such as Holt Logistics were forced to adapt to meet consumer preferences and keep goods flowing through as quickly and efficiently as possible.

Holt Logistics was one of the operators that successfully navigated those challenges, all while maintaining a high level of customer service and continuing to invest in its facilities.

Eric Holt, chief commercial officer at Holt Logistics, said the softening of the economy has had an impact on business, with import numbers trending downward significantly year-over-year at ports on both the West Coast and East Coast.

“New York and New Jersey ports are down 30-35 percent, and a lot of that is on discretionary goods that people are choosing not to buy,” he said. “But if you look at our numbers on our main container terminal, Packer Avenue, we are flat through April. I attribute that to the normal day-to-day products like produce, fresh food, proteins and frozen French fries and veggies. This segment is still very strong.”

Holt added that it has been an atypical year so far for Holt Logistics with regard to its mainstay grape program from Chile and Peru due to climatic conditions and civil unrest in certain areas.

“Chile was down 20-25 percent depending on the region, and Peru was dealing with unrest in the southern part of the country, but overall grape shipments from Peru were up significantly. We did see the U.S. receive fewer grapes in total due to better markets in Europe, but that is different year to year, something we can’t control.”

Citrus is another key produce line that comes through Holt’s facility, and that also saw some changes compared to last year.

In Morocco, following 2022’s bumper crop, shipments are down 50 percent due to a severe drought in the region as well as the conflict between Russia and Ukraine.

But Holt also has a strong business relationship with South African citrus producers, and there is optimism for this summer.

In fact, he said a container line call was added back in from South Africa that was not there during the pandemic because container lines didn't have ships. Maersk and MSC had the first call of the season into Packer Avenue terminal in early June for South African citrus.

"We have had a 25-year relationship with the Western Cape Citrus Producers in South Africa, and that is a big milestone for us," said Holt.

Regarding the citrus category, he said it continues to grow in the U.S. and it outpaced the grape category as of three or four years ago years ago. "Everything we're seeing from Chile, Peru, Uruguay and Argentina is that the crop is there and they are going to be up this year," he said. "Some of the dynamics we can't control are the exchange rates throughout the world."

Overall, Holt said he expects citrus to be up 15-20 percent this year across the board at the port of Philadelphia. "Then in the summer we will start receiving kiwi from New Zealand, which is a large seasonal deal, and then we go right into Avocados from Peru. So we're ramping back up after lull with the change of seasons."

Holt said another main line – tropicals – has seen a very normal season.

"Logistical bottlenecks have been solved for the most part, and the labor issues and congestion that were present during the pandemic are a thing of the past," he said. "The tropical markets are doing well, sales of bananas and pineapples and the seasonal melons we are just finishing from Guatemala and Honduras had a very normal market and steady flow-through in terms of consumption."

Essentially, Holt said that "everyone is back in the pre-pandemic mode, where markets they were traditionally shipping to are there, so it's just a question of whether the crops are there and at the right quality."

Labor and efficiency

Perhaps one of the bigger challenges during the pandemic was maintaining an adequate workforce, according to Holt.

"Obviously, labor has been a big issue, and everyone was short on labor in warehouses and marine terminals," he said. "But now labor is back to adequate levels and we can focus on proper training of individuals and not just putting someone in there because you need a warm body. This helps us boost efficiencies and safety, and it makes us the preferred hub for reefer in terms of clearances, load times and getting produce out to market quickly so we can preserve shelf life."

Technology is another area where Holt Logistics has stood out, and Holt said investments made during the pandemic are now being employed to the benefit of both the company and its customers.

"We are now fully utilizing the technology we have at our disposal, and we are dialing it in to provide better transparency for our customers," he said. "We can make sure product is on and off the ship and cleared within 48 hours and ready for pickup. This has helped a lot."

Focus on customer service

Holt said much of his focus is on customer service, and in fact [Holt Logistics](#) just started a new customer excellence unit.

“It is designed to centralize the touch points of a lot of the big customers that come in and out of the port and its different facilities and warehouses,” Holt said of the new unit. “From a service standpoint, we are focused on door-to-door deliveries for those customers that want it. A lot of new customers and existing customers that are smaller in scale rely on us for these services.”

As a port, Holt said the goal is to grow and the investments made at Packer Avenue are allowing it to achieve its goals, such as reaching 1.3 million TEUs for the year.

“In this market, it will be tough to grow in other areas, like those that deal with discretionary goods,” he said. “But for our core business of produce and fresh foods, we are focused on doing them better.”

He said that by the end of Q4 Holt will have its first electric RTGs, or rubber-tired gantry cranes, which are used in the yard. This will allow Holt to densify Packer Avenue and increase what it is handling, while also enabling it to handle goods more efficiently for the truck drivers picking up.

“One of the KPIs we focus on is truck turn times from gate in to gate out,” he said, “and we are the best in the nation for facilitating those truck turn times. And having these RTG will help us keep that high goal as we grow.

“When you scale up, sometimes you take a step back with regard to customer service or performance,” Holt added, “but our goal is to not take any steps back in those categories as we continue to grow.”

[John Groh](#)

About John Groh |

John Groh graduated from the University of San Diego in 1989 with a bachelors of arts degree in English. Following a brief stint as a sportswriter covering the New York Giants football team, he joined The Produce News in 1995 as an assistant editor and worked his way up the ranks, becoming publisher in 2006. He and his wife, Mary Anne, live in northern New Jersey in the suburbs of New York City.

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