INDUSTRIAL DATA PROCESSING APPLICATIONS REPORT

Applications

Inventory Control

Type of Industry

Pipe and Tubing Distributor

Name of User

La Barge Pipe & Steel Co.

St. Louis, Mo.

Equipment Used

IBM System/360 Model 20 Computer System

Synopsis

La Barge Pipe and Steel Co. of St. Louis, Mo., a distributor of pipe and tubing, is using an IBM System/360 Model 20 computer system to handle payroll accounting, billing and order entry, sales analysis, accounts payable and inventory control.

The main application is inventory control. The system produces a daily inventory status report which describes each item, an assigned stock number, weight and cost per foot, the amount on hand, on order, in transit, committed and available.

The computer system also aids in long range sales and management planning.

La Barge Pipe and Steel Co. is using an IBM System/360 Model 20 computer system to handle a variety of company operations including payroll accounting, billing and order entry, sales analysis, accounts payable and inventory control.

Neither the size of the company nor the business in which it is engaged would ordinarily suggest the use of a computer. Nevertheless, La Barge is using a computer and expects increased business and profits by doing so.

"Most of our competitors feel they should have a small quantity of representative sizes of pipes," according to Pierre L. La Barge, founder and president. "Our approach has been to maintain an inventory to meet emergency requirements, large or small. For instance, we stock pipeline quantities -- miles of it -- in some sizes."

La Barge Pipe and Steel Co. of St. Louis, Mo., is a distributor of pipe and tubing. Founded as a proprietorship in January, 1953, the company was incorporated in 1956 and later moved to its present site on the banks of the Mississippi, south of St. Louis.

Five years after its incorporation, with a sales force of four men, La Barge was doing a gross volume of about \$4 million. Today, with a sales force of 12 and a branch sales office in Chicago, the firm is grossing over \$10 million a year. A large inventory and fast shipment of orders has enabled La Barge to build a clientele which extends throughout North America and occasionally reaches as far as Europe and Southeast Asia.

In order to determine the best way to handle customers' orders, the firm asked its accountants, Elmer Fox & Co., to do a systems study. Out of that study came a recommendation by Fox & Co. that La Barge begin to use computers.

A key factor in this decision was that the company, as a part of its future expansion plans, was projecting a move into mechanical tubing.

According to Mr. La Barge, the company's mechanical tubing business is expected to equal and eventually outstrip the pipe volume. In full swing, the mechanical tubing business -- almost all handled on a special order basis -- will require an inventory of between two and four thousand non-standard sizes and wall thicknesses in varying quantities. Manual inventory of such a stock cannot be done with any degree of speed and accuracy.

With the project on the drawing boards and with the volume of business beginning to cause pressure, La Barge acted upon the recommendations of its accounting firm and placed an order for an IBM 1440 data processing system. This was done in the winter of 1963-64, but before the computer could be delivered, the manufacturer introduced a new, low-cost, punched card computer developed for the smaller user, the System/360 Model 20.

Since the new computer could meet La Barge's projected needs, the manufacturer's representatives who were working with the company in developing computer programs recommended that the Model 20 be ordered in place of the 1440. This was done and the third-generation, solid state computer was installed two months before the projected expansion into mechanical tubing.

Despite the fact that the company made a transition from what Treasurer Ed Nester calls, "almost a pencil and paper operation directly to an advanced form of electronic data processing," La Barge had few problems of adjustment.

Once the computer was installed, the year and a half of preparation began to pay off. The time had been used not only to prepare programs but also to standardize ordering and other procedures to the point of compatibility with the machine. For instance, all sales order forms have been standardized so that information concerning an order is entered uniformly in a format that can be routinely processed into punched cards for use in the computer.

THE SYSTEM

The transfer to electronic data processing had been planned in five stages with about two weeks allowed between stages. The five stages are (1) payroll accounting, (2) billing and order entry, (3) inventory control, (4) sales analysis and (5) accounts payable.

Payroll accounting, as the simplest, was chosen as the first procedure to go on the equipment. The firm ordinarily employs between 75 and 80 people and, on the manual accounting equipment formerly used, the yard payroll had taken about four hours to complete. With the computer the job is performed in 10 minutes -- 30, if keypunch time is also included.

Billing and order entry was a necessary prelude to the key application -- inventory control. The company has tagged all invoices on which quick shipment is asked -- one tag requested sameday shipment, the other within 24 hours. Today 95% of all orders processed carry such tags. Such is the efficiency of the operation that on occasion an order is being loaded while the customer is still on the phone with the salesman.

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CARD LAYOUT FORMS FOR LA BARGE ORDER CARDS.

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THE ORIGINATING DOCUMENT IS A SHOP ORDER, FILLED OUT MANUALLY BY SALESMEN, AND, WITH APPROPRIATE FIGURES CIRCLED, SENT TO BE KEYPUNCHED THUS INITIATING THE SYSTEM.

But quick responsiveness must be based on the ability to anticipate and stock for demand, to match La Barge's current \$2 million inventory to needs, and to know just what is in stock and available for sale at any particular time.

The move to mechanical tubing, of course, means increase in inventory problems. Here is how La Barge's computerized inventory control system is set up to handle the need for fast, accurate information.

Status information is fed into the computer as each transaction occurs -- when a shipment is ordered from the factory, when notice is received that it is in transit, when it arrives at La Barge's yard, when it is committed to a customer and when it is shipped out.

Every morning, each salesman receives a daily inventory status report, carrying a description of each item, an assigned stock number, weight and cost per foot and how much is on hand, on order, in transit, committed and available.

With this information he can quickly determine whether he can fill a customer's order out of available stock. If, as sometimes happens, stock has been committed, but held on customer's order for delivery at a later date, he can decide whether a rush order can be filled out of committed stock and replaced by shipments already on order or in transit from the manufacturer, before the committed delivery date.

In addition to the daily inventory status report, the computer can be directed to abstract information of long-range value in sales and management planning.

For instance, La Barge uses the machine to print up reports on "items above maximum" and "items below minimum". Information concerning the desired maximum and minimum stock levels to be held are a part of the entries concerning each item of inventory.

By identifying those items which tend to go above maximum, the firm quickly identifies slow moving stock; those which tend to move below minimum are obviously fast-selling lines which should be stocked in greater quantities.

Such information, of course, is one valuable part of the fourth area of computer function --sales analysis. Combined with other information which the computer makes available -- such as a breakdown of sales by customer, region, season, etc. -- it will give La Barge a more comprehensive picture of its market and its effectiveness in selling that market than was possible before.

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CARD LAYOUT FORM FOR LA BARGE SALES ANALYSIS CARDS.

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ндуемын 17, 1967	LA BERGE PIPE & STOEL CO PROCHASE GROSS STATUS	MAGE 1
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CARD LAYOUT FORMS FOR INVENTORY CONTROL REPORTS. SHOWN AT BOTTOM: PURCHASE ORDER STATUS AND DAILY INVENTORY STATUS.

RESULTS AND FUTURE PLANS

The introduction of electronic data processing has enabled La Barge to standardize all order forms allowing information about an order to be punched into cards and processed by the computer. In addition, a considerable amount of time is now being saved on routine accounting and payroll functions. The inventory control portion of the system, with its daily inventory status report, allows the salesman to determine whether he can fill a customer's order from available stock.

The computer system also aids in long range sales and management planning. With the planned addition of the accounts payable function, La Barge management feels confident that they will have in their computerized operation a tool capable of supplying accurate and current information needed to control an expanding and increasingly complex operation.