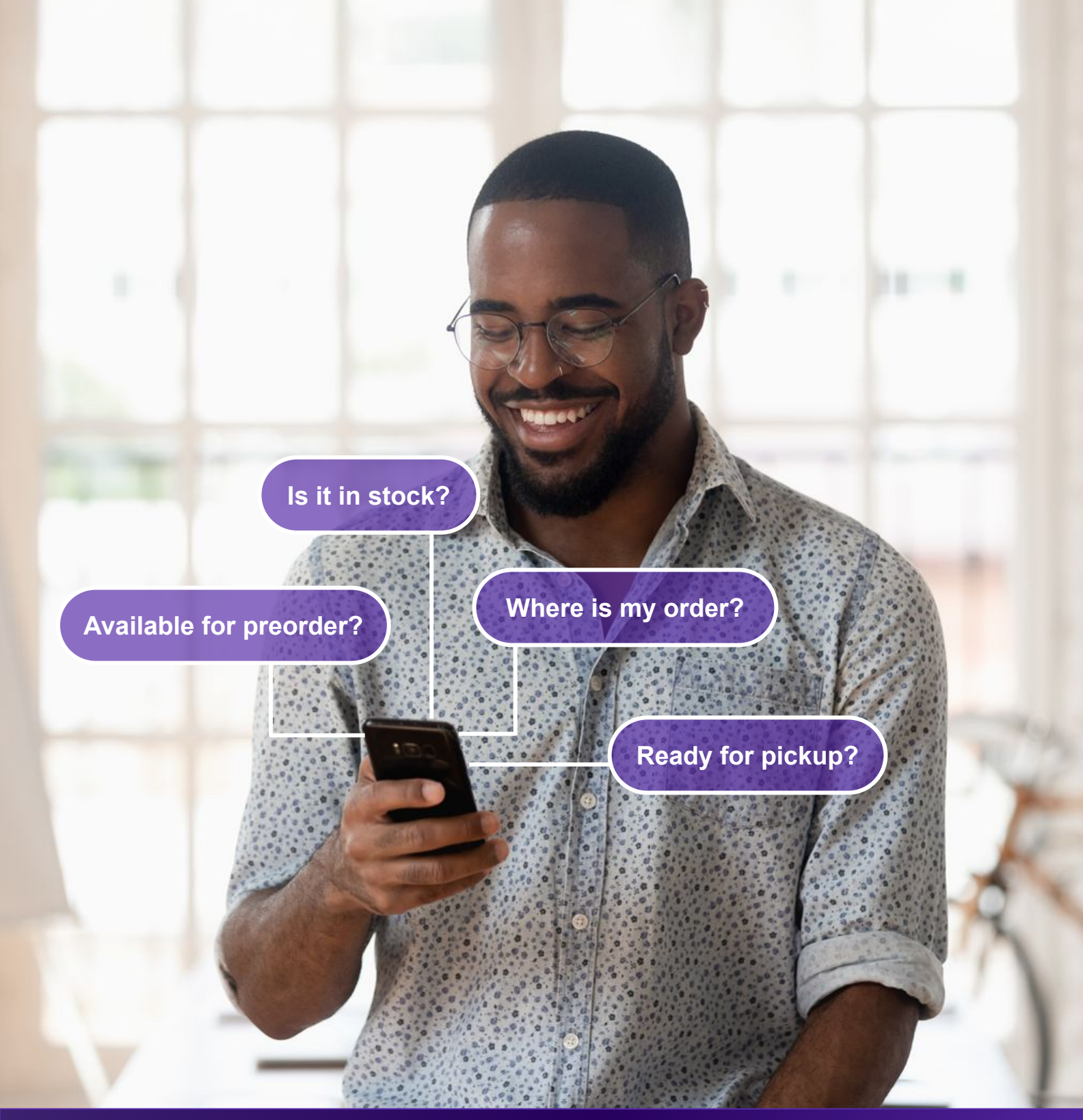

8 Common Fulfillment Challenges of Direct-to-Consumer Brands — And How to Overcome Them

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As a direct-to-consumer (D2C) brand, your ability to deliver on customer promises is key to succeeding in a crowded marketplace. Fulfillment is where those promises are put to the test.

Even a small issue—an unexpected stockout, a delayed shipment—can damage your reputation. And frustrate customers.

Picture this: A customer eagerly orders a product, expecting swift delivery. But behind the scenes, inventory data is outdated. Or shipments are split across warehouses. What should have been a seamless transaction flips into a source of frustration.

Fulfillment challenges are a reality for every D2C brand, but they don't have to be a liability. They can be opportunities for growth and even increased customer satisfaction.

The right tools can help you keep your promises and maintain customer trust. Here are eight of the most common obstacles D2C brands face—and real solutions you can put in place.

8 Common Fulfillment Challenges of D2C Brands

1. Poor Inventory Visibility
2. Addressing Preorder and Backorder Challenges
3. Challenges with Split Shipments
4. Making Changes to In-Flight Orders
5. Manual Processes in the Fulfillment Journey
6. Inability to Scale to Meet Demand
7. Multi-Region or Multi-Brand Fulfillment Complexity
8. "Where Is My Order?"

1. Poor Inventory Visibility

The Challenge

Dealing with poor inventory visibility can feel like you're constantly playing catch-up. Without accurate, real-time data, it's easy to oversell or undersell, leading to broken promises

to your customers. This not only frustrates them but also creates inefficiencies in your operations, leaving you scrambling to correct mistakes and fulfill orders.

How to Achieve Real-Time Inventory Availability

Imagine having all your inventory data in one place, updated in real-time, providing inventory awareness to all other systems so you never miss a beat. With Fluent Big Inventory, part of Fluent Order Management, you can centralize and manage stock levels with precision. This accuracy helps you manage stock levels, reduce errors, and keep customers happy by fulfilling orders on time.

Pro Tip: Use real-time data to improve demand forecasting. Accurate inventory visibility helps you:

- Optimize stock levels
- Reduce storage costs
- Avoid stockouts during busy times
- Predict future inventory needs

Key Questions to Ask:

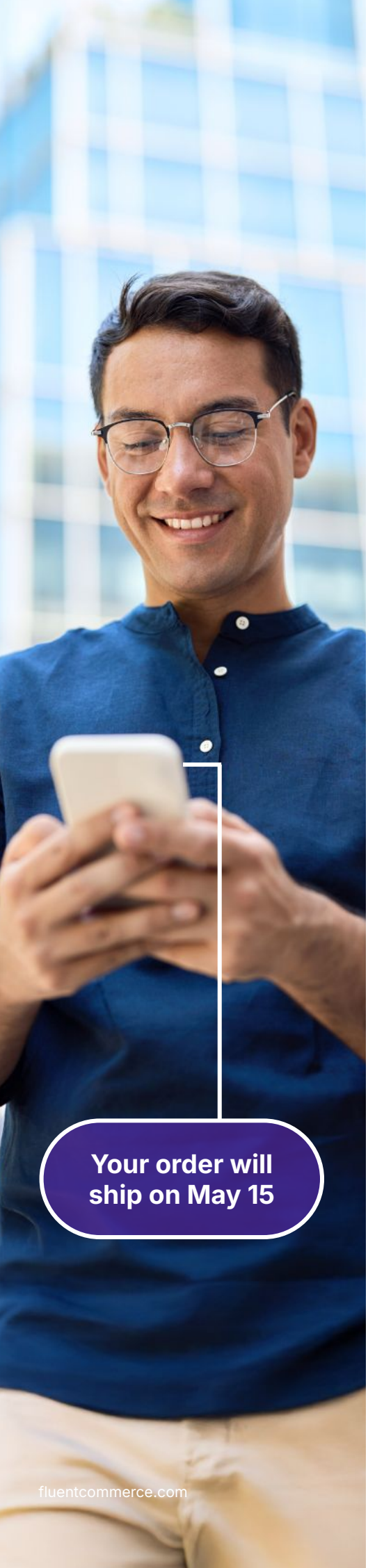
➔ Is inventory visibility a problem?
➔ Where are the data silos in our current inventory systems?
➔ What systems can I integrate to improve data flow?

2. Addressing Preorder and Backorder Challenges

The Challenge

Managing stock availability is a different challenge for direct-to-consumer (D2C) brands. Traditional systems are often limited to tracking only the ‘stock on hand’—what’s immediately available. But when you face long lead times or need to handle pre-orders and backorders, this simply doesn’t cut it.

You need a solution that not only manages your current inventory but also anticipates when new stock will arrive. That way, you can confidently allocate future inventory to customer orders.



How to Optimize Pre-Orders and Backorders

It all comes down to saving the sale! Effective preorder management allows you to secure sales even before your product is released. Effective backorder management is about not letting out-of-stock items stop a sale. To achieve this, you need to take control of your inventory, even before it arrives. Fluent Order Management tracks inbound inventory and allocates it to orders ahead of time, allowing you to capture sales opportunities without overpromising delivery dates.

By using advanced inventory statuses, you can clearly distinguish between current stock and incoming shipments. And provide customers with accurate delivery timelines. With Fluent Order Management, backordering becomes a strategic advantage, helping you align production with actual demand. Reducing warehousing costs and avoiding overstocking.

Pro Tip: Customize inventory statuses to show both current and incoming stock. This helps you create accurate delivery estimates and prioritize orders. Automate notifications to customers about their pre-orders and backorders to build transparency and trust.

Key Questions to Ask:

Preorders

- ➔ Do you have spikes in demand for newly released products?
- ➔ Are there products with a high likelihood of selling out quickly?
- ➔ Would you like to understand demand better for new product releases in advance?
- ➔ Do you offer early release sales for specific groups of customers?

Backorders

- ➔ Are we frequently running out of stock on popular items?
- ➔ Can we provide realistic estimates for when backordered items will be available?
- ➔ Are there specific products with consistent demand that could benefit from a backorder option?

3. Challenges with Split Shipments

The Challenge

Splitting shipments can be a complex balancing act. While shipping from multiple locations might speed up delivery, it can also increase costs and complicate order tracking. Each split shipment needs careful consideration to ensure it doesn't impact your profit margins or lead to customer dissatisfaction. The challenge is finding that sweet spot where speed, cost, and customer satisfaction align.

How to Maximize Your Shipping Efficiency

You can have the power to decide the most cost-effective and timely way to fulfill every order. With Fluent Order Management, you can set customized sourcing rules that ensure split shipments only happen when they benefit both you and your customer.

The dynamic sourcing logic evaluates each order against several criteria. Balance customer satisfaction with profitability by considering factors like customer tier, item profitability, and inventory turns before deciding to split. That way, you maintain control over your shipping process and keep costs in check.

Pro Tip: Use dynamic sourcing logic to assess each order's specifics before deciding to split. For example, customer tier or item profitability. This approach helps maintain margins and ensures timely deliveries. Consider using rules that factor in:

- Shipping costs
- Warehouse capacity
- Customer location

Key Questions to Ask:

➔ Can I currently offer split shipments?
➔ Do I consolidate to a single location and send in full, or do I ship separately?
➔ Can I assess the profitability of products within an order to determine when to split?
➔ Am I able to easily track split shipments?

4. Making Changes to In-Flight Orders

The Challenge

When you're dealing with long lead times or complex orders, the ability to amend or change open or in-flight orders becomes essential. Without flexibility in your systems, you might struggle to make necessary adjustments, leading to inefficiencies and potentially unhappy customers. This challenge often arises when orders need changes due to unforeseen circumstances, but your systems can't accommodate these updates in real-time.

How to Enhance Order Flexibility

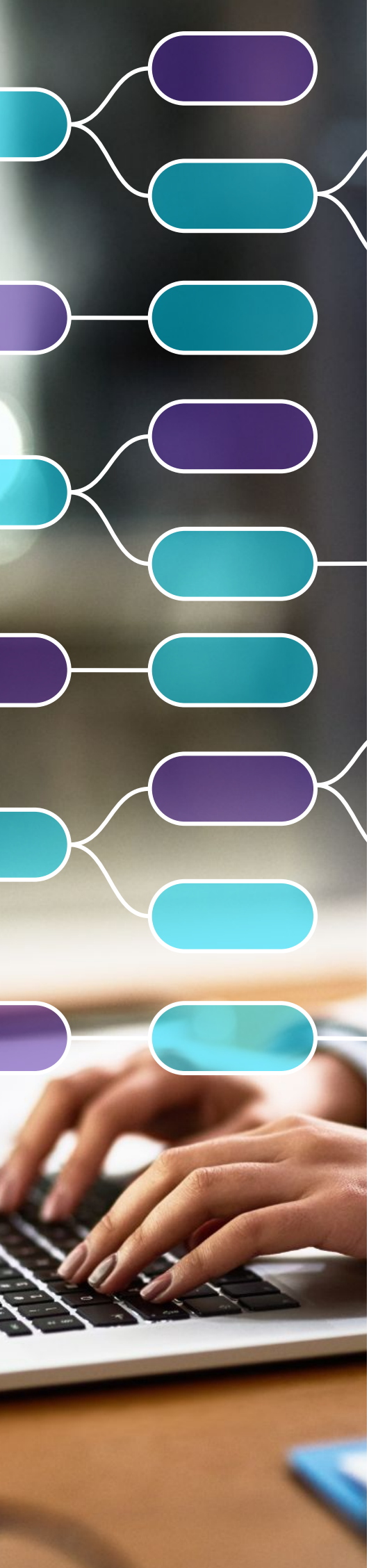
Gain the flexibility to adapt to changes in real-time. Customer needs evolve. You can create custom order statuses and update orders as needed with Fluent Order Management. Whether it's adjusting quantities, changing delivery dates, or responding to external factors, you can refine orders to match changing customer needs.

This unified view of orders empowers your team to manage both standard and exception scenarios. The result? Reduced delays and errors, smooth operations, and satisfied customers.

Pro Tip: Set up automated triggers for order updates. If an inbound shipment is delayed, create a rule to adjust affected orders and notify customers. Real-time integration with supplier systems can update order statuses based on external factors.

Key Questions to Ask:

- ➔ Can my teams make changes to in-flight orders?
- ➔ What are some of the common asks for customers in changing or updating their orders?
- ➔ Do changes to customer orders affect schedules? How are my customers notified of these changes?
- ➔ Will these changes result in repricing or resourcing? How do my current systems handle this?
- ➔ What rules do I need to have in place around what can be changed, and at what part of the order journey?



5. Manual Processes in the Fulfillment Journey

The Challenge

Relying on manual processes throughout the fulfillment journey can lead to inefficiencies, errors, and delays. Process issues and disconnected technologies across orders, fulfillments, and shipping cause delays and increase the risk of mistakes impacting overall efficiency and customer satisfaction.

How Fluent Order Management Can Help: Fluent Order Management integrates smoothly with other systems. It automates essential checks and updates. This cuts down on manual effort and speeds up fulfillment. The event-driven architecture keeps orders moving, even when other systems are delayed.

Fluent Order Management's ability to unify the order lifecycle ensures that all orders are processed efficiently and without unnecessary delays. Regardless of channel or complexity.

How to Accelerate Your Order Processing

Streamline your order lifecycle by automating key checks and updates. The right system should eliminate manual bottlenecks, keeping orders moving at the speed your customers expect.

Fluent Order Management’s event-driven architecture helps you fulfill orders quickly. Even external checks won’t slow you down, since it integrates smoothly with your other systems.

Pro Tip: Automate key steps like fraud checks or compliance approvals to remove bottlenecks. Use Fluent Order Management’s event-driven triggers to keep orders moving. Streamline integrations with payment gateways and regulatory systems to reduce order processing times.

Key Questions to Ask:

- ➔ Do I currently have any manual processes in the fulfillment journey that are slowing my teams down?
- ➔ Does my team have to use multiple systems to ensure orders are fulfilled effectively?
- ➔ Is there an opportunity to streamline or automate some of the tasks around my order management?

6. Inability to Scale to Meet Demand

The Challenge

Scaling your fulfillment operations, especially during peak periods, can be challenging. You need systems flexible enough to handle fluctuating demand. Without, you risk delayed shipments, overwhelmed warehouses, and unhappy customers. The ability to scale without losing speed or accuracy is key to maintaining your brand's reputation.

How to Scale and Flex Your Operations

Be ready for anything, whether it's a seasonal rush or an unexpected spike in demand. Fluent Order Management's API-first, cloud-based architecture lets you scale your fulfillment operations dynamically.

With its cloud infrastructure, resources can be scaled up or down as needed. This keeps your operations matching the demand. Fluent also acts as a flexibility layer, ensuring your investments in legacy systems, like ERP, are fully optimized.

Pro Tip: Use scalability features with predictive analytics to forecast demand spikes. They allow you to adjust resources ahead of time, keeping your fulfillment operations strong and responsive. Real-time monitoring helps you optimize resource allocation during peak periods.

Key Questions to Ask:

- ➔ Do you have times where you have high spikes in activity, or key peak trading periods?
- ➔ Do you have any reliability issues with your existing system during these peak periods?
- ➔ Do your systems auto-scale to meet this demand without any interruptions?

7. Multi-Region or Multi-Brand Fulfillment Complexity

The Challenge

Expanding into international markets or fulfilling across different brands or business units introduces many new

complexities. Variables can include differing regulations, tariffs, and multi-location fulfillment strategies. These challenges can make cross-border or cross-brand fulfillment feel overwhelming. Especially when trying to maintain efficiency and compliance across all regions.

How to Master Global Fulfillment

Navigate the complexities of cross-border/cross-brand operations with confidence. Fluent Order Management can be your glue that stitches together various external systems and processes, such as tax compliance, fraud checks, and regional shipping regulations. You can optimize every step of the fulfillment process by defining smart business rules and integrating your systems. Whether you're choosing the best regional hubs or managing international restrictions, you'll ensure compliance and efficiency. No matter where your orders are headed.

Pro Tip: Use Fluent Order Management's tiered sourcing logic to optimize cross-border and cross-brand shipments. Select the most efficient locations to minimize costs and delivery times. Review and adjust your sourcing strategies to respond to changing global trade dynamics.

Key Questions to Ask:

- ➔ Are you fulfilling across different geographic regions?
- ➔ Are you looking to fulfill across different brands?
- ➔ Are you looking to fulfill across different business units (e.g. retail, wholesale)?

8. "Where Is My Order?"

The Challenge

"Where is my order?" or the commonly referenced acronym "WISMO" is still the most common call into many D2C customer service call centers. Aka, these drive the most service costs. Your customer service team is on the front lines when order issues arise. If they lack a unified view of customer orders, resolving issues quickly becomes a challenge. This leads to longer call times and frustrated customers.

How to Improve Customer Service Efficiency

The key is ensuring your team has the right tools to provide quick, accurate service, reducing the burden on them and improving customer satisfaction. Fluent Order Management consolidates order data from all channels. Meaning, you can equip your customer service team with a complete view of every order. With real-time, accurate information.

Unified order data also enables faster service and shorter calls. Plus, by offering self-service options like real-time tracking, you reduce the volume of inquiries your team has to handle. Less "Where is my order?" calls, cut costs, and improved customer satisfaction.

Pro Tip: Implement real-time order tracking and flexible delivery options to let customers manage their orders on their own. This reduces the need for service calls and improves customer satisfaction. Use proactive notifications to keep customers informed about their order status, reducing anxiety and preventing unnecessary inquiries.

Key Questions to Ask:

- ➔ What is the most common call inquiry into my call center?
- ➔ How many applications are my customer service staff having to use to service customers?
- ➔ Is order observability and tracking a current issue for the operations and service teams?
- ➔ Are we looking to consolidate or aggregate systems to help our customer service teams drive better customer outcomes?

Next Steps: Empower Your Fulfillment Process with Fluent Order Management

Fulfillment is complex, but it doesn't have to be a constant source of stress. With the right strategies and tools, you can transform your fulfillment process to drive customer loyalty.

What's next?

- **Ready to take your fulfillment to the next level?** Schedule a personalized demo.
- **Want to see how it works in real life?** Check out our case studies. Learn more about how Fluent Order Management has helped brands like yours.
- **Looking to stay ahead of the curve?** Sign up for our newsletter. You'll get the latest insights on fulfillment and order management straight to your inbox.

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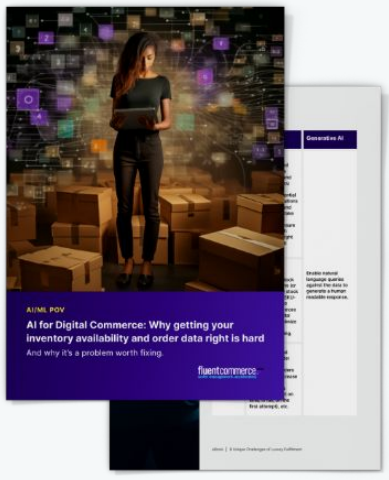

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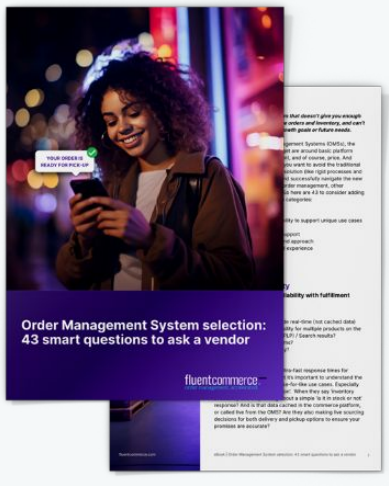

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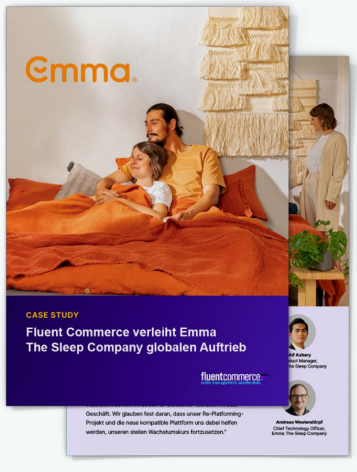

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