



The Complete Guide to Just-in-Time Delivery for CPG Brands



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Shifting Consumer Expectations

Just-in-Time Delivery:

A smarter way for CPG brands to reduce costs without sacrificing service.

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In a perfect world, we'd have inventory two or three weeks before a promotion. But that's just not reality anymore. Everything relies on just-in-time delivery just because it *has* to.

Jack Hanna

*Chex Finer Foods,
Director of Supply Chain*



The CPG Consumer Landscape

Today's consumer expects store shelves to stay stocked, online orders to arrive quickly, and seasonal products to appear exactly when they're needed: not too early and certainly not after demand has passed.

Behind the scenes, those expectations create enormous pressure for consumer packaged goods (CPG) brands. Inventory sitting in a warehouse ties up cash. And inventory that arrives too late results in empty shelves, unhappy retailers, and lost sales. Finding the balance between the two is one of the biggest challenges in modern supply chain management.

That's where Just-in-Time (JIT) delivery comes in.

What You'll Learn in This Guide:

For decades, manufacturers and distributors have relied on JIT principles to minimize inventory while keeping products moving efficiently through the supply chain.

In this guide, we'll explore:

- What just-in-time delivery is
- How JIT works within CPG supply chains
- The advantages and risks of the model
- Which brands benefit most from JIT
- How a transportation partner plays a critical role in making JIT successful



What is Just-in-Time Delivery?

Just-in-time delivery is a supply chain strategy where inventory arrives only when it's needed for production, distribution, or retail replenishment, rather than being stored for extended periods.

Instead of filling warehouses with weeks or months of inventory "just in case," businesses coordinate purchasing, production, transportation, and fulfillment so products move through the supply chain as efficiently as possible.

The Primary Goals of JIT Include:

- Reducing inventory carrying costs
- Improving cash flow
- Increasing inventory turnover
- Minimizing warehouse space requirements
- Reducing waste from obsolete or aging products
- Creating a more agile supply chain

While JIT is often associated with manufacturing, it's equally important in food distribution, grocery, and consumer packaged goods, where product freshness, retailer expectations, and promotional timing all influence purchasing decisions.



How Just-in-Time Works in CPG Logistics

A successful JIT strategy depends on every part of the supply chain working together.

Here's a simplified example: A snack manufacturer secures a promotion with a national grocery retailer beginning on August 1st. Rather than shipping inventory to the retailer six weeks early, the manufacturer schedules production based on forecasted demand and coordinates transportation so products arrive just before the promotion begins.

This Allows the Brand to:

- Avoid paying to store inventory
- Preserve product freshness
- Improve inventory turnover
- Reduce working capital tied up in warehouses

However, the margin for error becomes much smaller. If production is delayed, a shipment misses its pickup appointment, or weather impacts transit, products may arrive after shelves are expected to be stocked. That's when transportation becomes one of the most important components of a successful JIT strategy.

More CPG Brands Are Embracing JIT

Consumer buying habits have become increasingly unpredictable over the past several years. Retail promotions change quickly, seasonal demand fluctuates, product launches happen faster, and retailers expect suppliers to react almost immediately.

Rather than holding excessive inventory in anticipation of every possible scenario, many brands are shifting toward leaner inventory models supported by reliable transportation partners. For companies with accurate forecasting and dependable logistics, JIT creates significant competitive advantages.



The Benefits of Just-in-Time Delivery

Lower Inventory Costs

Warehousing isn't free. Every pallet sitting in storage represents capital that could otherwise be invested in product development, marketing, expansion, or operations.

JIT helps businesses reduce warehouse expenses, inventory insurance, handling costs, and capital tied up in excess inventory. For growing CPG brands, these savings can create meaningful improvements in profitability.

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Improved Cash Flow

Cash sitting on warehouse shelves isn't generating revenue. Because JIT reduces excess inventory, businesses can free up working capital while maintaining service levels.

That liquidity can then be invested in:

- New product launches
- Retail expansion
- Marketing campaigns
- Hiring
- Manufacturing improvements

Instead of purchasing inventory months in advance, brands buy closer to actual demand.



Better Inventory Turnover

Inventory that moves quickly is generally healthier inventory.

Higher turnover often means:

- Less product obsolescence
- Better freshness
- Reduced spoilage
- More accurate forecasting
- Improved warehouse efficiency

For food manufacturers especially, reducing the amount of time products spend in storage can directly improve quality and shelf life.

Greater Supply Chain Agility

Markets change quickly, retailers add promotions, consumers shift buying habits, and unexpected trends emerge.

Companies using lean inventory strategies can often adjust production schedules more quickly than organizations sitting on months of inventory. This flexibility allows brands to respond faster to changing customer needs while reducing the risk of overproducing slow-moving products.



The Challenges of Just-in-Time Delivery

Despite its advantages, JIT isn't without risk. In fact, because there is less inventory available as a buffer, every disruption becomes more significant.

Some of the most common challenges include:

Transportation Delays

- Weather
- Traffic
- Driver shortages
- Port congestion
- Mechanical issues

Even a single delayed shipment can impact production schedules or leave retail shelves empty. That's why carrier reliability and shipment visibility are essential components of a successful JIT strategy.

Forecasting Errors

JIT depends on accurate demand planning. If forecasts underestimate demand, brands risk stockouts.

If forecasts overestimate demand, they may still end up carrying excess inventory, negating many of JIT's financial benefits. Strong collaboration between sales, operations, forecasting, and logistics teams becomes increasingly important.



Supplier Disruptions

- Raw material shortages
- Production delays
- Quality holds
- International shipping disruptions

Each upstream issue creates downstream consequences when operating with lean inventory.

Companies using JIT often mitigate these risks by developing strong supplier relationships, maintaining contingency plans, and partnering with transportation providers that can react quickly when plans change.

Less Room for Error

Traditional inventory models often include extra inventory as a safety net. JIT intentionally removes much of that buffer. That means every appointment time, pickup window, and delivery schedule carries greater importance. Execution matters.



Is Just-in-Time Right for Every CPG Brand?

Not necessarily. Like any supply chain strategy, JIT works best when it's aligned with a company's products, customers, and operational capabilities.

JIT is often an excellent fit for brands that:

- Supply major grocery retailers
- Produce products with limited shelf life
- Experience predictable demand
- Have strong forecasting capabilities
- Work with dependable transportation partners
- Want to improve cash flow while reducing inventory costs

JIT may be more challenging for brands that:

- Experience highly unpredictable demand
- Depend on long international lead times
- Frequently encounter supplier disruptions
- Lack transportation visibility
- Don't yet have mature forecasting processes

For many organizations, the answer doesn't have to be choosing between "all JIT" or "all inventory." Instead, successful supply chains often blend lean inventory principles with strategic safety stock for high-risk products or critical customers. The goal isn't simply to carry less inventory but rather build a supply chain that's both efficient and resilient.

Chex Finer Foods: Just-in-Time in Action

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In a perfect world, we'd have inventory two or three weeks before a promotion. But that's just not reality anymore. We partnered with Zipline because they knew the food business and ran efficiently.



Jack Hanna
Director of Supply Chain
at Chex Finer Foods

JIT Isn't Always Ideal, It's Reality

Chex Finer Foods distributes products to grocery retailers and foodservice customers throughout the Northeast, where timing is critical to meeting customer expectations. JIT delivery allows Chex to balance inventory costs while ensuring products arrive when retailers need them.

We recently sat down with Jack Hanna, Director of Supply Chain at Chex Finer Foods, to learn the strategy behind mastering JIT delivery.

"In a perfect world, we'd have inventory two or three weeks before a promotion. But that's just not reality anymore," said Hanna on The TRUCK YEAH! Podcast. "Everything relies on just-in-time delivery just because it has to. We partnered with Zipline because they knew the food business and ran efficiently."

Today's CPG supply chains rarely operate in a perfect world. Promotions shift, demand changes, and suppliers face delays, forcing distributors like Chex Finer Foods to execute a Just-in-Time strategy that balances efficiency with customer service. Click the episode below to learn more.





FAQ

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Frequently Asked Questions About Just-in-Time Delivery

What are the biggest benefits of JIT?

The primary benefits include lower inventory costs, improved cash flow, higher inventory turnover, reduced warehouse space requirements, and increased supply chain agility.

What are the risks of JIT?

JIT leaves less room for disruption. Transportation delays, supplier issues, inaccurate forecasting, and unexpected demand spikes can all impact product availability if contingency plans aren't in place.

Which industries benefit most from JIT?

JIT is commonly used across consumer packaged goods (CPG), food distribution, manufacturing, automotive, retail, healthcare, and other industries where inventory costs and operational efficiency are key priorities.

Why is transportation so important in a JIT supply chain?

Because JIT minimizes excess inventory, transportation becomes the link that keeps the entire supply chain moving. Reliable carriers, shipment visibility, and proactive communication help ensure products arrive when customers need them—not before, and certainly not after.



Is Your Transportation Strategy Supporting Your JIT Goals?

Many companies focus heavily on inventory optimization while overlooking the transportation strategy needed to support it. But transportation is one of the biggest factors determining whether a JIT strategy succeeds or fails.

If your logistics partner lacks visibility, communication, or flexibility, even the best inventory plan can quickly unravel. On the other hand, the right transportation partner helps create consistency, reduce disruptions, and give supply chain teams greater confidence in their planning.

Zipline Logistics Helps CPG Brands Execute JIT Successfully

At Zipline Logistics, we understand that successful Just-in-Time delivery requires strategic transportation management built around your business goals.

Our team specializes in helping CPG brands navigate the complexities of today's supply chain through:

- A nationwide carrier network with deep CPG expertise
- Real-time shipment visibility
- Proactive communication and issue resolution
- Reliable on-time performance
- Data-driven transportation strategies
- Flexible capacity during seasonal demand and retail promotions

Improving the lives of transportation professionals.

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Whether you're supplying grocery retailers, club stores, foodservice distributors, or e-commerce fulfillment centers, we work alongside your team to create transportation solutions that support lean inventory without sacrificing service.

We are more than a truck: we are a strategic extension of your supply chain.

Ready to Build a Smarter JIT Strategy?

A successful Just-in-Time model doesn't happen by accident. It requires accurate forecasting, strong supplier relationships, and a transportation partner that understands the pace and complexity of the CPG industry.

If you're looking to reduce inventory costs without compromising retailer service levels, Zipline Logistics can help! Connect with our team to explore a transportation strategy that supports your Just-in-Time goals and keeps your products moving with confidence.



Contact Us

For more information, visit www.ziplinelogistics.com or call us at 888-GOZIPLINE.