What to Pick?

How to evaluate in-store manual picking solutions for grocery e-commerce

StrongPoint

Pick **What?**

This whitepaper is designed to support decision making for grocery retailers who are already running, or are preparing to launch, in-store picking as their fulfilment method.

While other models, including dark store and automated solutions, have their place, this guide focuses specifically on in-store operations, the most common starting point for many grocery retailers

One of the major advantages of in-store picking for incumbent retailers is the ability to leverage existing infrastructure: their stores and their staff.

The aim of this whitepaper is to support decision-making with a clear, structured overview of what to look for in a solution, and how to assess whether it is suited to ensure maximum efficiency for maximum profitability.

While there is an understandable concern about cannibalization, where online orders replace existing in-store sales, this should be weighed against the broader risk of not offering e-grocery at all once the market reaches a tipping point.

The necessity and pace of e-grocery adoption vary significantly by country. In markets with double-digit penetration, such as the UK, e-grocery has become a central part of the competitive landscape. In others, where penetration is still low, the pressure to act is less immediate.

The key point is that retailers must evaluate the trajectory of their own markets and make decisions accordingly, balancing short-term costs with long-term positioning.

Pick at **Higher Speed to Unlock Profit**

Picking speed plays a big role in how profitable your e-grocery operation is. The faster you can pick, the more orders you can handle with less time and fewer people.

Picking speeds vary widely, however StrongPoint grocery retail customers average 240 items picked per hour across their entire store network, with some consistently exceeding 300.

Even small improvements in speed can add up to real savings when spread across all your stores. Because picking happens every day, in every store and on every shift, even small changes can make a big difference at scale.

Even if your grocery e-commerce operations are running well now, picking a little faster, or a lot faster, is a concrete way that every grocer can cut costs immediately.

Is your grocery e-commerce running at peak efficiency?

RetailQ
From StrongPoint

RetailQ is a free analytics service for grocers designed to identify cost savings and improve efficiency in their in-store picking operations.

In one recent analysis, RetailQ revealed that a grocery retailer could **improve the efficiency of their e-commerce order picking operations by 70%** through targeted changes.

Click here to learn more or scan the QR code

Pick-**By-Light**

Pick-by-light technology uses signals from electronic shelf labels (ESLs) to guide store associated to the items they need to pick, something that is especially useful for stores with high staff turnover.

Pick-by-light speeds up the process by reducing search time and minimising errors. It also makes it much easier for pickers.

The system is particularly effective in categories with high SKU density or items that look very similar. If you have ever searched in vain for a particular spice, you will instantly understand the impact of this technology.

Although not yet widely used in all markets, it is already common in regions with higher labour costs, such as Scandinavia, where even modest efficiency gains have a substantial financial impact.

Key benefits of pick-by-light include:

- Average 10 to 15 percent increased overall picking efficiency, depending on the SKU range, store layout, order profile and picker turnover
- Faster onboarding of new or agency staff, as pickers do not need to memorise product locations
- Ergonomic advantage during long shifts, as pickers can focus on shelf cues instead of reading from a screen

The system can be configured selectively for specific pickers or product types, enabling targeted gains where they matter most.

By improving the performance of the lowest quartile of pickers, the technology helps raise consistency across the team and store network. It is especially helpful for stores with high staff turnover or a reliance on seasonal or temporary workers.

Pick **More-By-Light**

Taking pick-by-light further:

Highlighting multiple picks ahead:

Beyond guiding pickers to the next item, pick-by-light systems can be set up to show several upcoming items using different coloured lights. This lets pickers see at a glance what needs to be picked next.

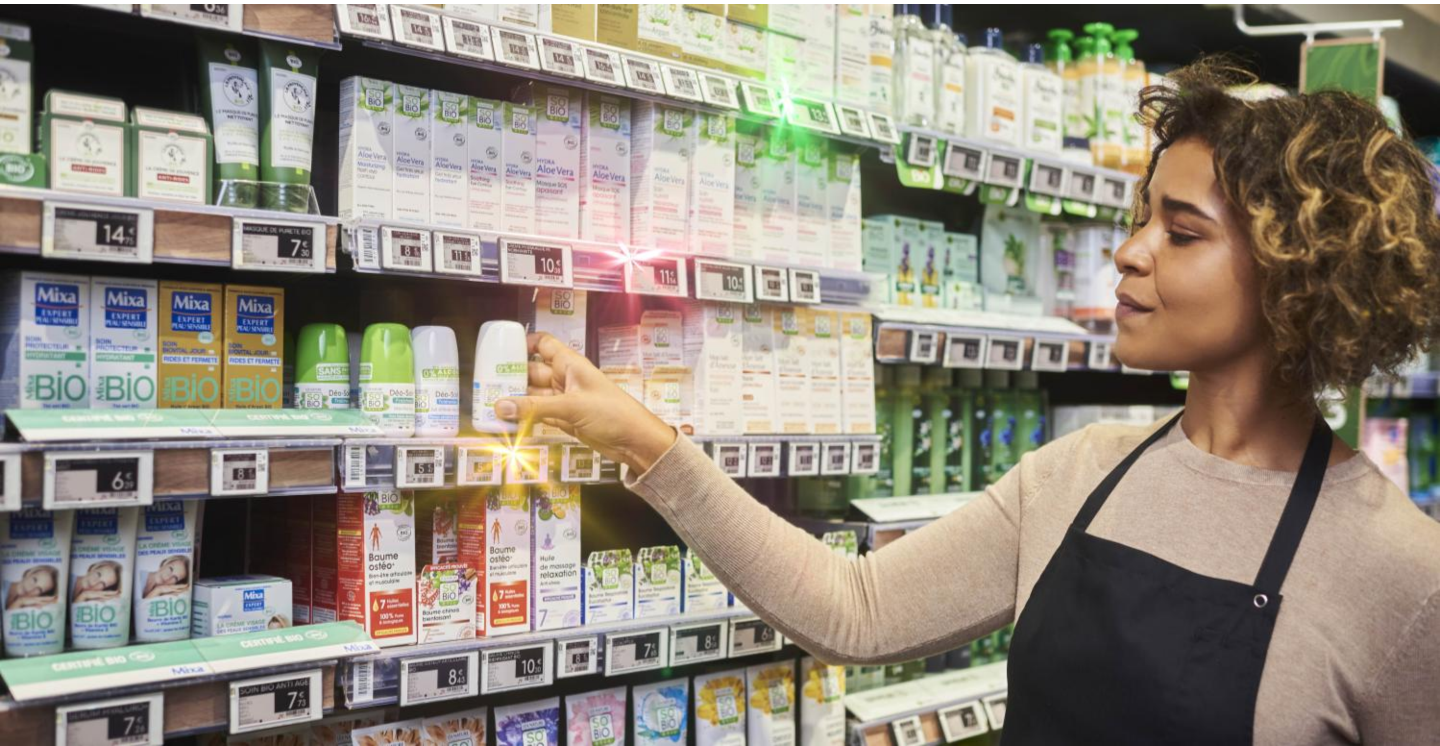
These kinds of improvements are especially valuable in busy stores or large order volumes, where saving even a few seconds per pick adds up quickly.

Route optimisation through next generation ESLs with geolocation:

Next generation shelf labels, such as those with embedded positioning sensors like VusionGroup's EdgeSense, can identify exactly where each product is located in the store.

With this level of accuracy, the picking system can use that information and can plan the best possible route through the store to collect all items in the shortest amount of time.

When combined with pick-by-light, this level of smart routing takes in store picking to a new level of precision and control.



Pick **Hands Free**

Hardware and your order picking setup matter just as much as software.

It is easy to focus on the picking software, but the physical setup is just as important to maximise efficiency.

One of the most important things is to keep pickers' hands free as much as possible. Ring scanners enable pickers to scan items without having to stop or hold a device.

Simple holders or mounts for phones or handhelds reduce the need to pick up and put down devices and the software needs to be optimised to ensure the pickers tap as little as possible.

In addition, battery-powered Bluetooth weighing scales can be integrated on the picking trolley so pickers can weigh items instantly instead of having to walk to the regular in-aisle scales, and even wait behind regular customers.

The trolley setup matters too. A good picking trolley should be easy to steer, easy to pack, and easy to move around the store.

Even the type of bag or container affects picking speed.

Plastic bags are fast and flexible, paper bags are slower but more sustainable, totes are sturdy but heavy, and cardboard boxes can take time to assemble.

What works best depends on your layout, delivery setup, and what customers expect.

Pick **on-demand (at the same time)**

On-demand orders (sometimes known as express, ultra-fast or q-commerce), need to be delivered quickly, but they do not need to be picked entirely separately.

A more efficient approach is to integrate the on-demand orders with existing scheduled e-commerce picking.

Instead of running two completely distinct fulfilment processes, retailers can incorporate on-demand orders into the main picking flow.

The critical challenge is finding the right balance: on-demand orders arrive continuously throughout the day and must be delivered against strict deadlines, while scheduled orders are usually batched and more predictable.

If efficiency alone is prioritised, urgent orders may miss their delivery windows. If speed alone is prioritised, overall productivity drops and scheduled orders suffer.

The key is to design workflows where both types of orders can be handled in parallel, using the same systems and routes, while building in the flexibility to fast-track urgent orders when needed.

This requires careful planning of picking routes, dynamic allocation of staff, and constant monitoring of deadlines to ensure neither side is compromised.

When managed well, this approach enables retailers to maximise the use of existing picking capacity throughout the day, while still delivering the immediacy that on-demand customers expect.

Pick **on-demand (at the same time)**

Taking the on-demand order topic further:

Supporting on-demand orders with real-time shelf data

To make on-demand orders work well, customers need to trust that what they order is actually in stock. Real-time shelf-edge cameras such as Captana from VusionGroup help with this by showing what is really available on the shelf.

By connecting shelf data to your on-demand commerce tools, you can make sure customers only see items that can be picked. This reduces the risk of substitutions, speeds up the picking process, and improves the shopper experience.

Turning shelf data into a new revenue stream

Real-time shelf availability data is not just useful for your own operations. It can also be valuable to on-demand order platforms and delivery partners.

By sharing or licensing this data, you can help third parties improve their own Services. For example, by hiding out-of-stock products, tailoring offers to what is available, or improving order accuracy.

This creates a new way to get value from your in-store technology, turning your shelf data into a commercial asset.

Pick **Buy (vs Build)**

Some grocers choose to build their own in-store picking solution from scratch. Others buy from third-party providers, including those with roots in software or warehouse management systems.

Building in-house offers control, but comes with trade-offs:

- Internal teams must balance priorities across multiple projects, not just e-commerce
- Resourcing is fixed. It is difficult to scale up or down based on demand
- Costs are often included in broader IT budgets, making it hard to track the true cost per order

Even with strong internal capabilities, a solution built in isolation is limited to one retailer's data, perspective, and operational setup.

The benefits of shared platforms:

Buying a proven solution gives access to the collective learning of many grocers with varied formats and challenges.

A mature, grocery-specific platform has solved many problems already. You are not starting from scratch but leveraging a solution that has been tested and improved in the real world.

Other benefits include:

- Continuous improvements driven by countless (and ever-increasing) number of real picks
- User interfaces refined by a broad set of users
- A solution that adapts to a wide range of store environments

Another advantage is cost efficiency. **When a platform is shared across many retailers, the total cost to serve, including development, maintenance, and support, is spread across the user base.** And the more users on the platform, the more affordable and sustainable it becomes.

It is the same logic behind modern software platforms. Shared infrastructure delivers scale and innovation at a cost level individual organisations cannot match. **Features built for one grocer often benefit all other grocery retail users.**

Pick **Buy (vs Build)**

Why shared platforms stand out

Shared platforms bring three further advantages:

- They provide breadth of functionality, since they are designed to cover multiple use cases and store environments rather than being shaped by one operator's specific needs.
- They keep costs lower, because development and maintenance are distributed across the platform instead of being carried by a single retailer.
- And they accelerate learning, as improvements and best practices discovered in one market are quickly available to retailers in others using the same system.

Licensing from other grocers

Some grocery retailers buy a solution developed by a larger grocery retailer. These solutions are popular as they are based on a proven real-world grocer's operations, but they also come with risks.

These systems are likely to have been built around one organisation's structure, store formats, and internal needs, not built for a multitude of different situations and setups.

In addition, the original operator's priorities may well drive the roadmap. The same goes for UI or workflow updates.

Pick **Fast to onboard**

In-store picking systems need to be easy to use and easy to roll out across many stores.

In grocery, high staff turnover, frequent use of temporary labour, and store-by-store operational differences make standardisation difficult.

A picking system that is fast to onboard reduces the burden on managers and ensures consistency across locations.

New pickers should be able to learn the system in minutes, not hours. **With the right setup, staff can get up to speed in under 10 minutes.**

This reduces onboarding time and lowers the risk of errors during peak periods or when using agency or temporary staff. And once the system is in place, onboarding additional locations is just as seamless.

With best-in-class solutions, new stores can typically be onboarded in under a day or less.

Ease of use supports not just better day-to-day performance, but faster expansion.

A system that does not require intensive training or store-specific adjustments can be scaled quickly and with confidence.

Pick **future-proof**

A future proof picking solution is one that can grow, adapt, and remain relevant in an environment that continues to change.

What defines a solution as future proof is not only the software itself, but the focus and mindset of the team behind it. A strong product roadmap, clear release cycles, and a commitment to continuous improvement are essential.

Also, **the grocer should have an ability to develop the roadmap with the supplier** so they can have their unique requirements adapted to and fed into the long-term planning.

This means not just routine updates, but ongoing problem solving and responsiveness to how the solution is used in real stores.

Generic platforms or repurposed warehouse systems often fall short because they are not built with grocery in mind. Grocery retail presents unique operational challenges that require a specialist approach.

A future proof solution must be developed and supported by a team that understands those specific demands and is focused entirely on meeting them.

Pick **Efficient Implementation**

In grocery e-commerce, time is a competitive factor. **The faster a solution can be implemented, the sooner it can begin generating operational and financial returns.**

Delays in deployment mean lost efficiencies, prolonged labour costs, and missed opportunities to serve customers better.

A well-coordinated, standardised and efficient implementation with standardised APIs allows grocers to adapt to changing demand, pilot new store formats, or scale proven models across the estate without long lead times.

The best systems can be live in just a couple of months, enabling grocers to move from decision to execution within a single quarter.

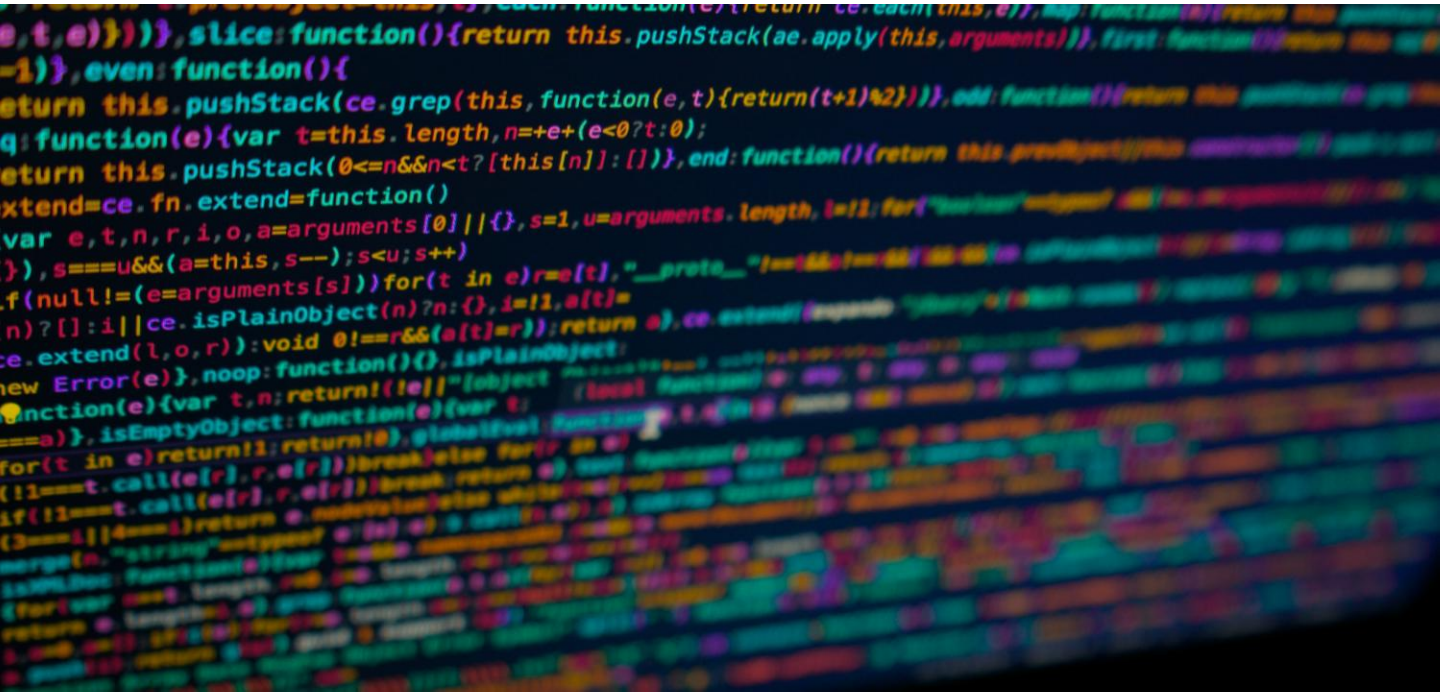
A simple and smooth implementaton reduces internal friction.

When a solution is intuitive to use and does not require complex infrastructure, it is easier to train staff, easier to gain buy-in, and easier to standardise across different sites.

This is especially important when deploying across a large number of stores, where variation can create inconsistency and inefficiency.

Grocers already running in-store picking know that success is not only about what a system can do, but how quickly it can be put to work.

An efficient implementation is not just convenient. It is a strategic advantage.



Pick & Scale

Scalability is a critical factor for any e-grocery operation looking to grow and adapt in a dynamic market. Leveraging scalable solutions ensures that your picking operations can handle increasing volumes and complexity without sacrificing efficiency or accuracy.

One of the key aspects of scalability in picking operations is the ability to manage varying order volumes. For example:

Scale at one store from the Monday peak to the Wednesday or Thursday low:

Solutions should be flexible enough to adapt to daily fluctuations within a single store. For example, handling higher order volumes at the start of the week and then efficiently scaling down for midweek lulls, ensuring optimal resource utilization at all times.

Scale between stores like having small, medium, and large volume stores:

During peak times such as holidays or promotional events, the volume of orders can surge significantly. Scalable picking solutions enable grocers to handle these seasonal spikes in demand effectively.

By utilizing advanced algorithms and intelligent automation, these systems can dynamically allocate resources and adjust picking strategies to maintain high throughput and meet customer expectations during these critical periods.

Scale between stores like having small, medium, and large volume stores:

Solutions should be designed to accommodate varying store sizes, layouts, formats and capabilities.

Adapting to every store size and setup

Whether managing a small neighborhood store, a medium-sized suburban outlet, or a large urban hub, scalable systems ensure consistent efficiency and accuracy.

This allows for seamless operation across different store formats and volumes, adapting to the specific needs and demands of each location.

Scalable picking solutions enable grocers to handle spikes in demand effectively. By utilizing advanced algorithms and intelligent automation, these systems can dynamically allocate resources and adjust picking strategies to maintain high throughput and meet customer expectations across all these dimensions of scalability.

Pick **Configurability**

Not every grocery store looks the same, and neither does every picking operation. Even within the same retail network, stores can vary widely in size, layout, and e-commerce maturity.

Some may be highly optimised. Others may just be starting out. That's why configurability matters.

A small-format store with low order volume does not need the same picking setup as a high-volume urban hub.

The ability to tailor workflows, features, and tools to match each store's needs, without forcing a uniform approach, is essential.

A well-designed system offers different paths for different realities. It supports simple use cases where appropriate while making it easy to scale or adjust when operational demands evolve.

But configurability alone is not enough. Getting it right requires a partner who takes the time to understand how each store works.

That means listening closely, adapting thoughtfully, and genuinely caring about long-term success, not just ticking boxes at rollout. Configurability makes the system fit the store. And long-term commitment ensures it keeps fitting, no matter the format, volume, or stage of digital maturity.

Pick **SaaS**

The software delivery model behind a picking solution shapes its flexibility, scalability, and long-term cost.

Software as a Service (SaaS) has become the go-to model for future-ready grocery operations.

SaaS enables rapid deployment with minimal infrastructure. Because it runs in the cloud, there's no need for on-site servers, reducing both setup time and ongoing IT costs.

This is especially valuable for grocers' stores.

Automatic updates ensure the system improves continuously, without downtime or manual upgrades.

Security is stronger too, with data stored in protected cloud environments.

SaaS also supports store-level flexibility. Bring Your Own Device (BYOD) options allow staff to use their own smartphones during peak times.

For grocers who need to scale fast and stay current, SaaS offers a low-friction, high-impact foundation.

Conclusion

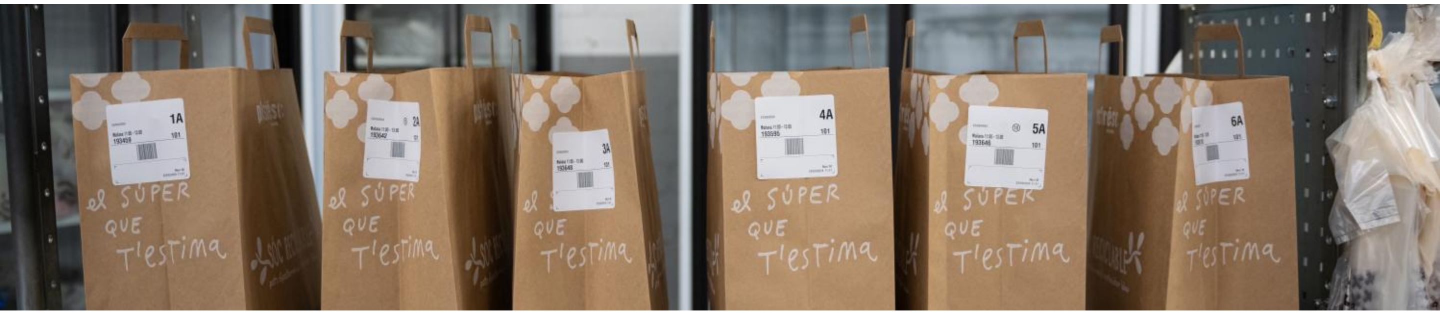
Why Pick Less?

Making grocery e-commerce picking more efficient and cost-effective is still just one piece of the efficiency and profitability puzzle.

Getting online grocery right also means having the right setup for preparation, consolidation, storage as well as handover for the pickup or home delivery. The last mile options also provide very different levels of efficiency and can have substantial impact on profitability.

This whitepaper is focused on the order picking part of the puzzle and highlighted the key things to look for when choosing a solution.

If you want to run operations more efficiently, take care of customers properly, and stay ready for whatever comes next, the decisions you make now will matter for the long term. So pick wisely!



About StrongPoint

StrongPoint is a grocery-focused retail-technology company serving grocers for over 40 years. We offer an end-to-end e-commerce platform purpose-built for grocery, with everything you need for seamless e-grocery fulfilment. Today, our technology powers grocers in more than 20 countries worldwide.

For more information, visit **strongpoint.com**

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