



# International Journal of Multidisciplinary Research and Growth Evaluation.

## The challenge of making non-sortable profitable for E-commerce

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### Article Info

**ISSN (online):** 2582-7138

**Volume:** 05

**Issue:** 04

**July-August 2024**

**Received:** 25-05-2024;

**Accepted:** 30-06-2024

**Page No:** 682-687

### Abstract

In the dynamic realm of e-commerce, the proliferation of non-sortable items has ushered in a wave of intricate challenges, fundamentally reshaping the landscape of profitability and operational efficiency for businesses operating within the digital sphere. These non-sortable items, defined by their voluminous proportions, substantial mass, irregular forms, and fragile composition, necessitate a specialized and nuanced approach to handling and logistical management, resulting in amplified operational expenditures and intricate logistical intricacies. As consumer demand for these distinctive products continues to surge, e-commerce enterprises find themselves at a critical juncture, tasked with seamlessly integrating non-sortables into their supply chains in a manner that not only upholds financial solvency but also surpasses customer expectations.

This article embarks on a comprehensive exploration of the multifaceted challenges surrounding the seamless assimilation of non-sortable entities into the e-commerce supply chain, offering a diverse range of strategic approaches aimed at optimizing logistics, refining cost management methodologies, deploying strategic automation solutions, and enhancing the overall customer journey. By delving deep into these strategic pillars, enterprises are empowered to deftly navigate the complexities posed by non-sortable items, transforming these apparent hindrances into catalytic opportunities for gaining a competitive advantage within the fluid and dynamic market environment.

Real-world case studies spotlight the industry giants such as Amazon, Wayfair, IKEA, and Peloton, showcasing successful strategies in navigating the intricate terrain of non-sortable products and furnishing invaluable insights for businesses striving to excel in the ever-evolving e-commerce arena. Armed with these strategic insights and innovative tactics, businesses are equipped to unlock novel pathways for growth and prosperity in the rapidly changing e-commerce sector, charting a course towards elevated market strategies and enhanced success and leadership in the digital marketplace.

**DOI:** <https://doi.org/10.54660/IJMARGE.2024.5.4.682-687>

**Keywords:** Non-sortable items, efficient logistics, cost management, supply chain, specialized handling

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### Introduction

The e-commerce landscape has experienced exponential growth over the past decade, transforming the way consumers shop and businesses operate. With the convenience of online shopping and the ability to quickly compare products, more shoppers are turning to e-commerce platforms for a wide range of goods, including traditionally difficult-to-handle items known as non-sortables. Non-sortables refer to products that are challenging to automate in sorting processes within warehouses or distribution centers due to their size, weight, shape, or fragility. Common examples of non-sortable items include large furniture pieces, home appliances, exercise equipment, and automotive parts.

As the diversity of products offered online continues to expand, e-commerce businesses increasingly face the challenge of managing these cumbersome items efficiently and profitably. Unlike smaller, parcel-friendly products that can be effortlessly processed through automated systems, non-sortables require more manual intervention, specialized equipment, and careful handling.

This complexity presents significant logistical and economic challenges, from increased labor costs to higher shipping expenses and the potential for damage during transit <sup>[1]</sup>.

In an industry where margins are often thin, and customer expectations for fast, reliable delivery are high, finding ways to make non-sortables profitable is crucial. The ability to handle these goods effectively can open up new revenue streams and provide a competitive advantage, especially as consumer demand for such products grows.

This article aims to explore the multifaceted challenge of integrating non-sortables into the e-commerce supply chain profitably <sup>[2]</sup>. By examining the logistical hurdles, operational costs, and customer service considerations, we will identify strategies and innovations that can help businesses turn these challenges into opportunities. From optimizing logistics solutions to enhancing automation and improving customer experience, we will delve into practical approaches that e-commerce companies can adopt to manage non-sortables efficiently, ensuring profitability and customer satisfaction in a competitive market.

### **Understanding Non-sortables in E-commerce Characteristics of Non-sortables**

Non-sortable items possess unique characteristics that make them challenging to handle within an e-commerce framework. Here's a closer look at what defines these items. Items that exceed standard dimensional limits set by sorting conveyors and automated systems <sup>[3]</sup>.

Products like large furniture (sofas, dining tables), home appliances (refrigerators, washing machines), and fitness equipment (treadmills, elliptical machines) fall into this category. Their dimensions often surpass the capabilities of traditional automated sorting infrastructure, leading to a reliance on manual processing. Products that are too heavy for automated handling systems. Machinery parts, automotive components, and bulk materials are prime examples. The weight of these items necessitates the use of specialized lifting equipment and manual intervention to move them through warehousing and distribution processes <sup>[4]</sup>.

Products with non-standard shapes that do not fit neatly onto conveyor belts or within typical sorting bins. This includes items like rolled rugs, unique art sculptures, and custom furniture. Some products require special packaging to prevent damage during transit. For example, fragile items like glassware, high-end electronics, and delicate antiques need extensive cushioning and often non-standard packaging configurations, making automated handling impractical <sup>[5]</sup>.

Products that are prone to damage and require careful handling. Fragility adds a layer of complexity as these items cannot be jostled or subjected to rough handling. Examples include ceramics, glass products, and certain electronic devices. Items that contain hazardous materials requiring special handling and compliance with safety regulations. This can include batteries, chemicals, and flammable products <sup>[6]</sup>.

### **Prevalence in E-commerce**

Non-sortable products are becoming more prevalent in the e-commerce sector as consumer preferences shift and the types of products available online diversify. E-commerce platforms have rapidly expanded their offerings in large home goods, given consumer demand for convenience in purchasing bulky items <sup>[7]</sup>. Companies like Wayfair and IKEA rely heavily on their logistics networks to manage these non-sortable goods.

The demand for home appliances purchased online has climbed as consumers seek the convenience of home delivery. Products like ovens, refrigerators, and air conditioning units represent significant logistical challenges <sup>[8]</sup>. Car enthusiasts and repair shops alike are increasingly sourcing large automotive parts and accessories online. These items often include heavy and irregularly shaped products like engine components, bumpers, and tires. As more consumers look to create home gyms, the online sale of large equipment like treadmills, ellipticals, and weight benches has seen a significant uptick <sup>[9]</sup>.

Studies indicate a surge in online sales of bulky items. For instance, during the COVID-19 pandemic, as more people shifted to online shopping, the sales of non-sortable products saw substantial growth. E-commerce giants like Amazon reported significant increases in their furniture and appliance segments. Shoppers now expect a comprehensive range of products to be available online, from daily essentials to large home items. The convenience of home delivery, coupled with easy return policies, has made purchasing non-sortables more attractive to consumers.

### **Market Trends Driving Non-sortables**

As consumers become more comfortable with the concept of purchasing large and valuable items online, the barriers to buying non-sortables have decreased. Improved product descriptions, enhanced online shopping experiences, and reassuring return policies have bolstered consumer confidence. Technologies such as augmented reality (AR) and virtual reality (VR) are being used to enhance the online shopping experience for non-sortables. For instance, customers can use AR to visualize how a piece of furniture will look in their home. These tools help bridge the gap between online and in-store shopping, providing a more informed and confident purchase process. E-commerce platforms have evolved to better accommodate non-sortable items. Enhanced UX (user experience) features, detailed product specifications, and customer reviews help buyers make informed decisions about large purchases <sup>[10]</sup>. Platforms are also incorporating better logistics solutions and partnerships to ensure seamless delivery experiences for non-sortable items.

### **Challenges in Handling Non-sortables**

The efficient management of non-sortable items poses several unique challenges for e-commerce businesses. These challenges span logistical, operational, and customer service dimensions, significantly impacting the bottom line and operational efficiency <sup>[11]</sup>.

### **Logistical Challenges**

Non-sortables often require significant manual intervention to move, sort, package, and ship. Unlike smaller items that can be easily handled by automated systems, bulky and heavy items necessitate the use of forklifts, pallet jacks, and manual labor. This human intervention increases the opportunities for errors, injuries, and inefficiencies <sup>[12]</sup>. To prevent damage and ensure safety, non-sortables must be handled following specific protocols. This often involves additional training for warehouse staff and adherence to stringent handling procedures <sup>[13]</sup>. The risk of mishandling and damage is higher, demanding more meticulous oversight.

Most automated sorting systems are designed for small to medium-sized parcels. The infrastructure required to

automate the handling of non-sortables is significantly different, often requiring larger, more robust equipment and customized solutions. Current technology may not always accommodate non-sortables efficiently<sup>[14]</sup>. While robotics and AI have made significant strides, their application in handling oversized and irregularly shaped items is still developing.

This necessitates a greater reliance on manual processes, reducing efficiency and increasing costs.

Non-sortables often require more space for storage and handling. Large items cannot be stacked or stored densely, leading to inefficient use of warehouse space. Specialized storage solutions, such as custom racks and shelving, further complicate warehouse logistics. Keeping track of large items in an organized manner requires advanced inventory management systems. Traditional barcode systems may not suffice, necessitating more sophisticated tracking solutions like RFID<sup>[15]</sup>.

### Operational Costs

The need for more human labor inherently drives up operational costs. According to industry analyses, labor costs for handling non-sortables can be significantly higher than for standard items. This includes not only wages but also benefits, training, and safety measures. High reliance on manual labor can lead to increased employee turnover due to physical strain and the repetitive nature of the work. This necessitates ongoing hiring and training, adding to the operational costs<sup>[16]</sup>.

Bulky items are costlier to ship due to their size and weight. Carriers may impose additional fees for handling oversized packages, and the logistics of moving these items are more involved than for smaller parcels. Non-sortables often require special handling during transportation<sup>[17]</sup>. This might mean using carriers equipped to handle oversized items, as well as additional handling fees and more complex shipping arrangements. Specialized vehicles and equipment are often necessary, increasing shipping costs.

Standard packaging materials and methods may not suffice for non-sortables. Custom packaging solutions to prevent damage during transit are necessary, which are often more costly. This includes reinforced boxes, protective padding, and custom-built crates. The likelihood of damage is higher with non-sortables, leading to higher returns and refunds.

### Managing these returns involves additional logistics and labor, impacting overall profitability<sup>[18]</sup>

#### Customer Service and Satisfaction

Coordinating deliveries for large items is more challenging. Customers expect timely deliveries, but the complexities of shipping non-sortables can lead to delays. Managing these expectations is crucial to maintaining customer satisfaction<sup>[19]</sup>. Some non-sortables, such as furniture, require white glove delivery services which include room-of-choice delivery, assembly, and packaging removal. These services improve customer satisfaction but significantly increase operational costs.

Facilitating returns for non-sortables is more complex and costly. Items need to be repackaged and shipped back efficiently, often involving high transportation costs and logistical challenges. Complications in the return process can lead to customer dissatisfaction<sup>[20]</sup>. A smooth, hassle-free return experience is crucial, but challenging to achieve with bulky items.

The size and weight of non-sortables make them prone to damage during handling and shipping. Ensuring products arrive in perfect condition is vital for customer satisfaction but requires meticulous planning and handling. Implementing stringent quality assurance processes to check products before they leave the warehouse can help reduce the incidence of damage but adds to the operational workload and costs<sup>[21]</sup>.

### Strategies for Profitability

Given the unique challenges associated with handling non-sortable items, e-commerce businesses must adopt innovative and strategic approaches to ensure these products contribute positively to their bottom line. Here are key strategies that can help transform these challenges into profitable opportunities<sup>[22]</sup>.

#### Efficient Logistics Solutions

Investing in specialized equipment such as forklifts, pallet jacks, and cranes can significantly improve the handling of heavy and oversized items. This equipment allows for safer and more efficient movement of goods within warehouses. Engaging third-party logistics providers (3PLs) that specialize in handling non-sortables can enhance operational efficiency<sup>[23]</sup>. These providers offer expertise and resources tailored to the unique needs of bulky and heavy items. For example, companies like XPO Logistics and Giant Logistics have built capabilities for managing large and complex shipments.

Designing warehouse layouts with dedicated zones for non-sortables can streamline operations. These zones should be equipped with appropriate shelving and storage solutions to accommodate large items. Utilizing vertical space efficiently can also help manage floor space more effectively. Implementing cross-docking can reduce the need for long-term storage and speed up the distribution process<sup>[24]</sup>. In cross-docking, incoming non-sortable items are directly transferred from incoming to outgoing transportation with minimal storage time, improving efficiency and reducing costs.

Use of 3PLs that have expertise in handling non-sortables can significantly enhance efficiency. These providers bring in specialized capabilities and infrastructure to manage bulky and heavy items. For example, companies like DHL Supply Chain offer tailored logistics solutions for large and complex shipments. Outsourcing the logistics of non-sortables to 3PLs allows e-commerce businesses to focus on core competencies while leveraging 3PL expertise to handle logistical complexities.

#### Cost Management

Investing in efficient packaging solutions that protect products while minimizing material costs is crucial. Custom packaging that uses less material, yet provides adequate protection, can lead to significant cost savings. Businesses can employ packaging engineers to design optimal solutions<sup>[25]</sup>. Negotiating discounts with suppliers for bulk packaging materials can also reduce costs. Establishing relationships with packaging suppliers can yield cost advantages through volume purchasing.

Developing strategic relationships and negotiating favorable rates with carriers specializing in oversized items can lower shipping costs. Establishing long-term contracts with volume commitments can provide cost savings. Consolidating

shipments of non-sortables can optimize transportation costs [26]. Grouping items destined for similar locations reduces the frequency of trips and maximizes carrier utilization, leading to cost efficiencies.

Implementing advanced Inventory Management Systems (IMS) solutions can optimize stock levels, prevent overstocking, and reduce storage costs. Real-time tracking and data analytics can provide valuable insights into inventory turnover and storage requirements. Order Management Systems (OMS) solutions can streamline the order fulfillment process, ensuring that non-sortables are matched with the most efficient shipping methods and carriers.

Automated order processing can reduce manual errors and improve order accuracy [27].

### Enhancing Automation

Investing in robotics designed for handling heavy and bulky items can reduce the reliance on manual labor and increase efficiency. Companies like Fetch Robotics and Boston Dynamics are developing robots capable of managing non-sortables. Automated Guided Vehicles (AGVs) can transport large items within warehouses, reducing the need for manual intervention and optimizing the internal movement of goods. These autonomous vehicles can navigate complex environments, improving safety and operational efficiency [28].

IoT-enabled sensors can monitor the location, condition, and movement of non-sortable items in real time. This ensures that businesses have complete visibility into their inventory and can quickly address any issues that arise. Implementing RFID systems can enhance tracking accuracy and inventory management. RFID tags provide real-time data on the movement and status of items, facilitating better decision-making and logistics planning [29].

Investing in modular and scalable warehouse systems allows businesses to adapt to changing demands. This flexibility ensures that as the volume of non-sortable items fluctuates, operations can scale accordingly without sacrificing efficiency. Developing automation plans that incorporate future technological advancements ensures that businesses remain competitive.

Staying ahead of industry trends and adopting emerging technologies can provide long-term benefits [30].

### Improving Customer Experience

Providing real-time tracking information through advanced logistics platforms can enhance customer satisfaction by keeping them informed about their shipment's status. Firms like UPS and FedEx offer end-to-end tracking solutions that provide transparency [31].

Communicating potential delays proactively and providing accurate delivery windows helps manage customer expectations and reduces dissatisfaction.

Implementing strict quality control measures to inspect and verify product condition before shipping reduces the risk of damage. These measures include thorough packaging inspections and testing [32]. Developing protocols for damage prevention and handling during transit ensures products arrive intact. This can include special handling instructions and enhanced protective packaging.

Offering multiple customer support channels, such as phone, chat, and email, ensures that customers can easily reach out for assistance. Well-trained support teams can handle queries

effectively, improving overall satisfaction. Simplifying the returns process for non-sortables by offering pick-up services and providing easy-to-follow return instructions can enhance customer loyalty. Streamlining return logistics reduces customer frustration and improves their overall experience [33].

### Case Studies

Understanding how different companies navigate the complexities of non-sortable items in e-commerce can provide valuable insights and practical strategies for other businesses. This section explores case studies from e-commerce giants and specialized retailers to illustrate how they have successfully managed and even thrived despite the challenges posed by non-sortable items.

#### Amazon

As the world's largest e-commerce company, Amazon has revolutionized its logistics network to handle non-sortable items efficiently. Amazon operates specialized fulfillment centers known as "non-sortable centers" dedicated to managing large and heavy items such as furniture and appliances. These centers are outfitted with advanced material handling equipment, including pallet jacks, forklifts, and conveyor belts designed to move large objects.

Amazon leverages big data and machine learning algorithms to optimize inventory management and predict demand for non-sortable items. This technology-driven approach ensures that the right products are stored at the optimal locations for quick dispatch [34]. The company also uses real-time tracking for these items, improving inventory visibility and customer satisfaction.

#### Wayfair

Wayfair, a leading online retailer for home goods, has developed a robust logistics and delivery network specifically tailored to large and bulky items. The company has partnered with dedicated delivery services for white-glove delivery, which includes in-room placement and assembly for items like furniture and large appliances. This enhances customer satisfaction by providing an all-in-one solution from purchase to installation.

Wayfair's focus on customer experience is evident in its return process [35]. For large items, the company offers hassle-free returns with scheduled pickups and transparent return instructions, making it easier for customers to manage returns of bulky products.

#### IKEA

Ikea, known for its flat-pack furniture and home goods, has integrated its supply chain to handle the peculiarities of non-sortable items. The company's warehouses are equipped with custom shelving and racking systems designed to store flat-packed items efficiently.

Additionally, Ikea has invested in its distribution network to streamline delivery and assembly services.

Ikea's commitment to sustainability extends to its logistics operations for non-sortables. The company utilizes eco-friendly packaging materials and has implemented slow steaming in its shipping practices to reduce carbon emissions. These sustainable practices not only appeal to environmentally conscious consumers but also align with global sustainability goals [36].



### Peloton

Peloton, a prominent fitness equipment and services company, operates a direct-to-consumer model that includes the delivery and setup of its non-sortable exercise equipment. The company uses a network of specialized carriers and provides white-glove delivery services.

Peloton places a strong emphasis on customer engagement and satisfaction. The company offers comprehensive customer support, including real-time tracking of equipment deliveries and easy-to-schedule technician visits for assembly and maintenance. This focus on customer service enhances the overall experience and encourages long-term loyalty<sup>[37]</sup>.

### Conclusion

As e-commerce continues to evolve and expand, the challenge of making non-sortable products profitable presents a unique opportunity for businesses to innovate and differentiate themselves in a competitive market landscape. By embracing creativity, niche targeting, and customer-centric strategies, e-commerce entrepreneurs can overcome the hurdles associated with selling products that do not fit neatly into traditional categories.

One of the critical takeaways from our exploration of non-sortable products is the need for businesses to think outside the box and experiment with unconventional approaches. By challenging established norms and preconceptions, e-commerce enterprises can discover new avenues for growth and success. This might involve creating limited edition offerings, leveraging partnerships with complementary brands, or introducing innovative marketing campaigns that resonate with a specific audience.

Furthermore, customer engagement emerges as a cornerstone of profitability when selling non-sortable products online. Building authentic relationships with customers, seeking feedback, and adapting based on consumer insights can foster brand loyalty and drive sustainable revenue streams. In a digital age where personalized experiences and tailored solutions reign supreme, e-commerce businesses that prioritize customer-centricity are poised to thrive in the face of adversity.

As we conclude our exploration of the challenges and opportunities surrounding non-sortable products in e-commerce, it becomes evident that success hinges on a combination of strategic foresight, continuous adaptation, and a deep understanding of consumer behavior. By embracing these principles and remaining agile in the face of change, e-commerce entrepreneurs can unlock the full potential of non-sortable products and turn them into profitable ventures that captivate audiences and drive business growth.

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