

# For E-Commerce Logistics Firm Radial, Christmas Is Coming Early. Very Early. The fulfillment and warehousing provider is making preparations for the holiday shipping season well ahead of schedule, with an eye on clogged global supply chains and the Delta variant

Smith, Jennifer . Wall Street Journal (Online) ; New York, N.Y. [New York, N.Y]. 22 Aug 2021 .

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## FULL TEXT

E-commerce logistics specialist Radial Inc. is accelerating its forecasting process and taking other steps as it prepares for a potentially tumultuous holiday shipping season clouded by the impact of the Delta variant on consumer spending.

"There's just a lot of uncertainty right now," Radial Chief Operating Officer Laura Ritchey said. "We definitely believe that the volume will be bigger than last year, approximately 15% or so is what we're planning for."

Ms. Ritchey said King of Prussia, Pa.-based Radial, which in North America fills online orders from its network of 25 distribution centers, is pushing seasonal preparations forward, with the business allocating warehousing space and staff far ahead of Christmas and the end-of-year sales surge.

At this point in a typical year, Radial might be checking in with retail customers about once a month on what they expect demand to look like at the peak of holiday shopping, Ms. Ritchey said.

Instead, Radial is "checking in every week, and for particular clients that might have more volatility, it could be twice a week," she said. "And we expect that to intensify," with the near-daily demand checks that usually occur in late October and November also moving up.

Radial's preparations come as companies are trying to predict what the Delta variant might do to in-store shopping and consumer demand in general, while the delivery of goods has been slowed by supply-chain congestion around the world, from factories in Asia to freight-handling outlets in the U.S. Midwest .

The number of unknowns is throwing expectations and conventional forecasting tools out the window, forcing retailers and their logistics specialists to drum up contingency plans.

Some businesses are pulling imports forward, which has made the congestion at maritime gateways worse and added to the pressure on strained logistics networks. Shoppers spooked by shortages earlier in the pandemic might choose to load up on holiday gifts early, making it harder for retailers to assess demand.

The latest wave of Covid-19 infections in the U.S. could thin store traffic again, or prompt people to revert to habits from early in the pandemic, like swapping office wear for loungewear, as they load up digital shopping carts.

Radial, which is owned by Belgium's bpost SA, expects consumers to mix in-store and online shopping this year, for instance, picking up e-commerce orders in person, or trying things on in stores, then buying them online.

"At some point, we're going to have to decide where the inventory is placed," Ms. Ritchey said. "It's probably even more important just knowing the inventory availability and where it is, and having a method in which we can get it to the customer." That could include shipping from a store or distribution center to a customer's home, or getting items ready for curbside pickup.

The company is also talking with customers on how to handle delays should holiday demand outpace forecasts.

Early shoppers could also have trouble finding what they want.

"With some of these inbound delays, we may see consumers who want to shop in August and product availability may not be until September," Ms. Ritchey said.

The Delta variant hasn't affected operations at Radial's warehouses much, though there has been "a slight uptick" in absences in recent weeks, she said.

The company, which typically adds thousands of seasonal workers leading up to the holidays, has raised pay and increased its ads on social media to compete for workers in a tight labor market, Ms. Ritchey said.

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Credit: By Jennifer Smith

## DETAILS

<b>Subject:</b>	Shopping; Consumers; Electronic commerce; Logistics; Inventory; Pandemics; COVID-19
<b>Business indexing term:</b>	Subject: Consumers Electronic commerce Logistics Inventory; Industry: 45411 : Electronic Shopping and Mail-Order Houses
<b>Location:</b>	United States--US
<b>Classification:</b>	45411 : Electronic Shopping and Mail-Order Houses
<b>Publication title:</b>	Wall Street Journal (Online); New York, N.Y.
<b>Publication year:</b>	2021
<b>Publication date:</b>	Aug 22, 2021
<b>column:</b>	Logistics Report
<b>Section:</b>	C Suite
<b>Publisher:</b>	Dow Jones &Company Inc
<b>Place of publication:</b>	New York, N.Y.
<b>Country of publication:</b>	United States, New York, N.Y.
<b>Publication subject:</b>	Business And Economics
<b>e-ISSN:</b>	25749579
<b>Source type:</b>	Newspapers
<b>Language of publication:</b>	English
<b>Document type:</b>	News

**ProQuest document ID:** 2563297012

**Document URL:** <https://www.proquest.com/newspapers/e-commerce-logistics-firm-radial-christmas-is/docview/2563297012/se-2?accountid=44910>

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**Last updated:** 2021-08-22

**Database:** U.S. Major Dailies

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