

CASE STUDY

SSF Imported Auto Parts Uses Data to Navigate COVID-19

How Qlik Sense helped SSF reverse pandemic-driven declines with fact-based, data-driven decisions

45+

Years in Business

9

Warehouse Locations

\$880B

Automotive Industry

50%

Drop in Miles Driven

BACKGROUND

Founded in 1976 and based in South San Francisco, California, SSF Imported Auto Parts LLC is the leading North American warehouse distributor of OEM and aftermarket automotive parts for European vehicles. Serving the \$880 billion automotive industry, SSF operates nine warehouse locations offering multiple same-day deliveries and overnight shipping directly to auto repair workshops nationwide.

THE CHALLENGE

In early 2020, COVID-19 upended the automotive industry. From manufacturing constraints and logistics delays to an immediate drop in consumer driving habits, the industry came to a near standstill. By mid-March 2020, passenger miles driven were down 50% and the economy had entered a recession.

SSF's Business Intelligence team — Chris Kahler and Ryan Lessig — was tasked by CEO Thomas Beer with generating critical insights to understand why demand was down and which business segments were most affected. Short-term, SSF needed to maximize sales and protect profit margins. Long-term, the organization needed a toolbox of analytics and data views to enable rapid, fact-based decision-making.

INTEGRATED DATA AS THE FOUNDATION

Chris and Ryan leveraged the Qlik Sense Data Analytics and Integration Platform, which they had already been deploying as an enterprise replacement for legacy tools and scattered data sources. The SSF Qlik Sense environment integrates data from IBM AS400, Oracle NetSuite, IHS Markit, Elite Extra, and more.

“Prior to integrating Qlik as a company-wide BI platform, everyone was looking at their own individual reports. With Qlik, we've been able to tie dozens of data sets, spanning across all departments, and begun breaking down silos within the organization. This gives us an incredible level of transparency — and before, many data sets were not accessible to all users or the data was outdated by the time you received it.”

— Ryan Lessig, BI & Strategic Projects, SSF

FINDING THE GOLDEN NUGGETS IN THE DATA

Within two weeks of being tasked with the analysis, the BI team uncovered several key insights. By creating a measure to track invoices with only a single item purchased, a clear spike in single-line orders emerged precisely when COVID-19 lockdowns took effect — indicating that only critical car repairs were being performed, and that workshops were price-shopping across suppliers rather than consolidating orders.

Using Qlik Sense transformations, Chris and Ryan combined millions of product and pricing records to create product groupings by average sell price, revealing how different price segments were growing or declining post-lockdown. Combined with time-series visualizations — line charts, bar charts, and bullet charts — these measures painted a clear, compelling picture of the business.

“Ryan and I have hit our stride. My diverse understanding of the automotive aftermarket, combined with Ryan's product management and data science background, has developed a unique ability to bring raw data to life and analyze current business trends — allowing for the creation of actionable insights backed by fact-based solutions.”

— Chris Kahler, BI & Strategic Projects, SSF

RESULTS & BUSINESS IMPACT

Armed with data-driven conclusions presented via Qlik's storytelling mode, SSF was able to respond swiftly with effective, targeted strategies across sales, purchasing, pricing, and operations. These actionable insights reversed much of the declines brought on by the global pandemic.

“Traditionally the automotive aftermarket took an old school approach to most decision-making processes. By leveraging Qlik to implement a company-wide BI tool and break down silos, we have forged a culture that will not settle for less than fact-based decisions, forcing the conversation to be data driven.”

A HOLISTIC APPROACH TO BUSINESS INTELLIGENCE

Spanning Sales, Product Management, Purchasing, Pricing, and Operations, SSF has developed specific Qlik Sense applications for key stakeholders across each department. The platform has transformed how SSF's employees and suppliers review the business — including external partners such as Nissens North America, whose General Manager called the vendor scorecard application "invaluable" and "a first class tool."

ANALYTIC STACK & DATA ARCHITECTURE

SSF deployed Qlik Sense Enterprise Client-Managed on AWS, using AWS S3 for flat file storage, EC2 for computing power, and Qlik nPrinting for reporting. Source tables from IBM AS400, Oracle NetSuite, and other systems are converted to flat files, stored in S3, and processed through an automated ETL pipeline — delivering clean QVD files to power applications for dozens of users across the country.