

Fastener Distributor Index – Report #111 March 2021

Written by R.W. Baird analyst David J. Manthey, CFA with Quinn Fredrickson, CFA 4/7/21



Key Takeaway:

The March seasonally adjusted Fastener Distributor Index (FDI) was essentially stable m/m at **66.0**, implying conditions remained at the strong pace seen in February. The sales index remained at very high levels as respondents continue to report more demand than supply. The Forward-Looking Indicator (FLI) also saw further m/m acceleration, reaching a new record high of **78.5**, shattering last month's 73.9 record, and signaling additional expansionary demand conditions in the months ahead. Net, we believe March was another strong month for most fastener distributors relative to expectations, although supply seems to be more of an issue than demand currently.

Fastener Distribution Trends: March 2021

FASTENER DISTRIBUTION AT A GLANCE										
March 2021										
	----- Index Values -----									
	Mar	Feb	Jan	Dec	Nov	Oct	Sep	Aug	Direction	Rate of Change
ISM PMI (Manufacturing)	64.7	60.8	58.7	60.7	57.5	59.3	55.4	56.0	Growing	Faster
FDI	66.0	66.1	57.7	62.6	54.5	56.5	52.0	49.2	Growing	Slower
FLI	78.5	73.9	66.7	65.7	63.2	64.5	60.6	53.1	Growing	Faster
(Other Metrics)										
Sales	90.6	85.9	59.7	90.0	66.9	65.1	60.8	47.6	Growing	Faster
Employment	65.6	67.1	64.3	58.8	52.7	58.3	53.7	46.1	Growing	Slower
Supplier Deliveries	87.5	95.7	82.9	75.0	71.6	63.9	57.3	60.5	Growing	Slower
Respondent Inventories	31.3	38.6	47.1	55.9	59.5	55.6	63.4	64.5	Declining	Faster
Customer Inventories	18.8	15.7	24.3	27.9	29.7	33.3	34.1	40.8	Declining	Slower
Pricing, month-to-month	87.5	80.0	81.4	69.1	60.8	58.3	56.1	52.6	Growing	Faster
Pricing, year-to-year	92.2	91.4	87.1	86.8	77.0	72.2	80.5	65.8	Growing	Faster
				Higher Same Lower						
6-Month Outlook -March				88% 6% 6%						
FDI and Pricing are diffusion indexes. At 50, the performance of the category listed met expectations. A reading above 50 suggests the category outperformed expectations, while a reading below 50 suggests the category underperformed expectations.										

Source: Baird, FCH Sourcing Network, Institute for Supply Management

About the Fastener Distributor Index (FDI). The FDI is a monthly survey of North American fastener distributors, conducted with the **FCH Sourcing Network** and **Baird** with support from the **National Fastener Distributors Association**. It offers insights into current fastener industry trends/outlooks. Similarly, the Forward-Looking Indicator (FLI) is based on a weighted average of four forward-looking inputs from the FDI survey. This indicator is designed to provide directional perspective on future expectations for fastener market conditions. As diffusion indexes, values above 50.0 signal strength, while readings below 50.0 signal weakness. Over time, results should be directly relevant to **Fastenal (FAST)** and broadly relevant to other industrial distributors such as **W.W. Grainger (GWW)** and **MSC Industrial (MSM)**.

Key Points:

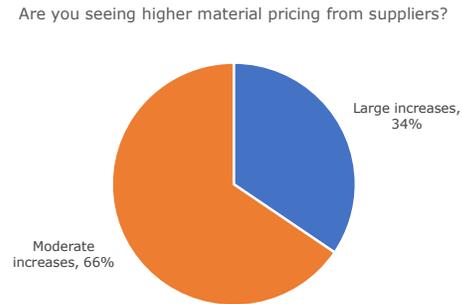
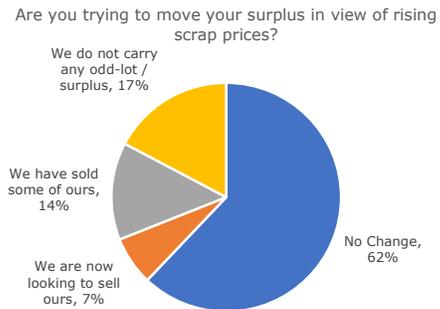
FDI sees stability in March. The seasonally adjusted March FDI (66.0) remained at very strong levels and was essentially unchanged vs. February. A robust 91% of respondents saw better than seasonally expected sales in March, breaking out even further vs. the ~70% seen consistently over the last three months. Price increases from suppliers continue to flow through at an elevated rate/frequency, while delays in importing materials continue to cause headaches for many respondents. Feedback suggests lead times continue to extend, leaving many distributors unable to fully meet the very strong demand.

FLI sets another record high. The seasonally adjusted FLI was 78.5, setting another new all-time high after last month's record 73.9 reading. Increasingly thin respondent and customer inventory levels amid imported materials constraints and extended lead times, along with a more bullish six-month outlook continue to power upward momentum in the FLI. Only the employment index saw some m/m moderation. With the FLI well above 50, customer and respondent inventories at very low levels, and respondents continuing to forecast favorable six-month outlooks, we believe the FDI should see additional expansionary readings ahead, implying continued improvement in the months ahead.

Employment levels were slightly softer m/m. The FDI employment index registered a still very strong 65.6 reading this month, although this did moderate vs. 67.1 in February. Forty-one percent of respondents saw employment levels as above seasonal expectations in March compared to 43% in February. Looking at the broader economy, the March jobs report showed an impressive gain of 916,000 jobs, easily ahead of economist expectations for +675,000, as the leisure and hospitality sectors react to normalizing travel demand with COVID-19 infections moderating. The construction market also added an impressive +110,000 jobs m/m. The unemployment rate now stands at 6%, although this still reflects nearly 7.9 million fewer jobs vs. pre-pandemic levels.

Supply chain constraints and pricing the key areas of focus. Nearly every comment again touched on supply chain constraints as importing material into the ports remains highly challenging amid congestion and container shortages. Per one respondent, *"The marketplace is in chaos. Supplies are low, demand is high. Lead times are extending due to material cost pressure and demand pull."* Echoing this, another participant said, *"Import delays continue to be extended and domestic manufacturer lead times going out as well. Price increases are out of control and coming in with every repeat order."* This has translated into significant supplier price increases: *"Increased costs continue to pressure margins. Customers fighting the increases even though they are aware of the market conditions. Delays in shipments from overseas causing lots of busy work."* Lastly, a respondent commented, *"We have seen an average [price] increase of 7% which lowers our profitability on the contract customers. Once the anniversary date of the contract arrives we will adjust customer costs to offset these increases."*

Supplemental questions.



Source: FCH Sourcing Network, Baird

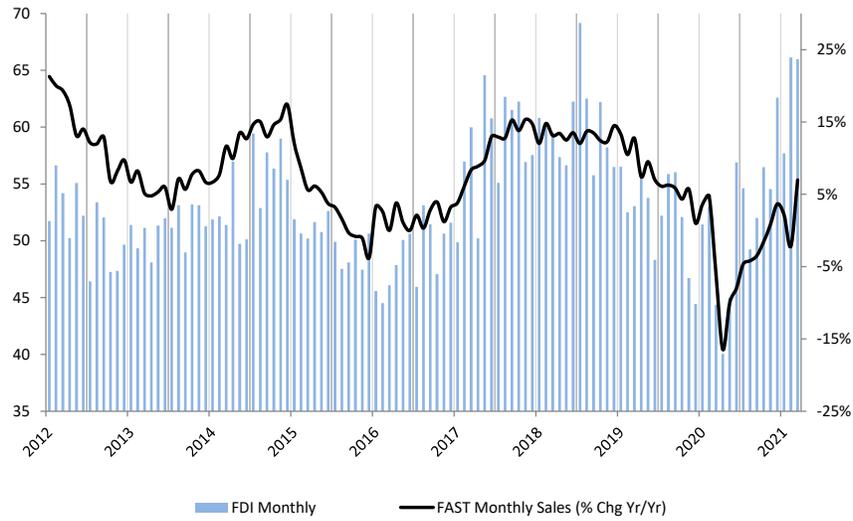
Fastenal's 1.5% overall February daily sales growth trailed our +4.5% estimate, including a significant drag from unfavorable weather conditions (-2.6-3%) and soft non-residential construction demand (-14.4%). Safety growth remained very strong at +17.6%, although growth has clearly moderated as FAST begins comping 2020 pandemic safety sales. Excluding safety products, underlying sales decelerated to -2.2% y/y. Turning to fasteners specifically, FAST's fastener sales were slightly weaker m/m at -2.1% (January -0.2%). For March (to be reported with 1Q21 earnings on March 13), we model +7.0% non-safety growth (against a -6.1% comparison from March 2020) and -5.8% safety sales as demand continues to moderate.

Risk Synopsis

Fastenal: Risks include economic sensitivity, pricing power, relatively high valuation, secular gross margin pressures, success of vending and on-site initiatives, and ability to sustain historical growth.

Industrial Distribution: Risks include economic sensitivity, pricing power, online pressure/competitive threats, global sourcing, and exposure to durable goods manufacturing.

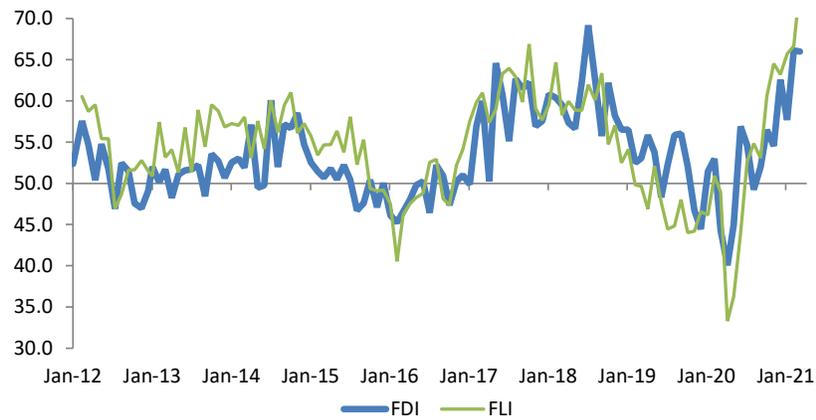
Fastener Distributor Index (FDI); Seasonally Adjusted



*FAST March 2020 – March 2021 Monthly Sales Presented as ex. Safety Products

Source: Baird, FCH Sourcing Network, Company reports

1-Month Lagged FDI vs. FLI (Both Seasonally Adjusted)



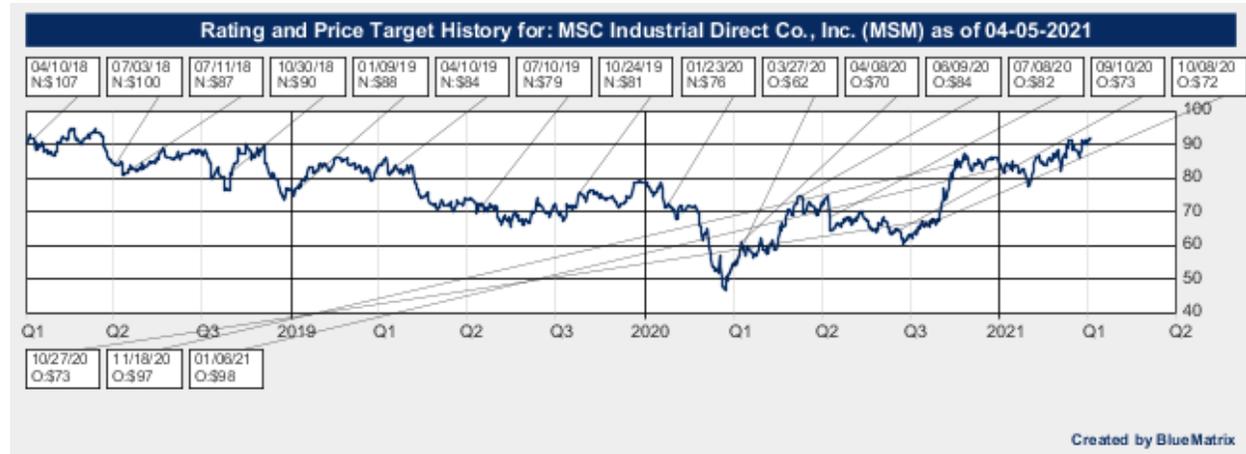
Source: Baird, FCH Sourcing Network

Appendix – Important Disclosures and Analyst Certification

Covered Companies Mentioned

All stock prices below are as of 4/6/2021.

Fastenal Company (FAST-\$51.27-Outperform)
 W.W. Grainger Inc. (GWW-\$408.43-Outperform)
 MSC Industrial Direct Co. Inc (MSM-\$91.64-Outperform)
 (See recent research reports for more information)



Robert W. Baird & Co. Incorporated makes a market in the securities of FAST, GWW, and MSM.

Robert W. Baird & Co. Incorporated ("Baird") and/or its affiliates expect to receive or intend to seek investment-banking related compensation from the company or companies mentioned in this report within the next three months. Baird may not be licensed to execute transactions in all foreign listed securities directly. Transactions in foreign listed securities may be prohibited for residents of the United States. Please contact a Baird representative for more information.

Investment Ratings: Outperform (O) - Expected to outperform on a total return, risk-adjusted basis the broader U.S. equity market over the next 12 months. **Neutral (N)** - Expected to perform in line with the broader U.S. equity market over the next 12 months. **Underperform (U)** - Expected to underperform on a total return, risk-adjusted basis the broader U.S. equity market over the next 12 months.

Risk Ratings: L - Lower Risk – Higher-quality companies for investors seeking capital appreciation or income with an emphasis on safety. Company characteristics may include: stable earnings, conservative balance sheets, and an established history of revenue and earnings. **A - Average Risk** – Growth situations for investors seeking capital appreciation with an emphasis on safety. Company characteristics may include: moderate volatility, modest balance-sheet leverage, and stable patterns of revenue and earnings. **H - Higher Risk** – Higher-growth situations appropriate for investors seeking capital appreciation with the acceptance of risk. Company characteristics may include: higher balance-sheet leverage, dynamic business environments, and higher levels of earnings and price volatility. **S - Speculative Risk** – High growth situations appropriate only for investors willing to accept a high degree of volatility and risk. Company characteristics may include: unpredictable earnings, small capitalization, aggressive growth strategies, rapidly changing market dynamics, high leverage, extreme price volatility and unknown competitive challenges.

Valuation, Ratings and Risks. The recommendation and price target contained within this report are based on a time horizon of 12 months but there is no guarantee the objective will be achieved within the specified time horizon. Price targets are determined by a subjective review of fundamental and/or quantitative factors of the issuer, its industry, and the security type. A variety of methods may be used to determine the value of a security including, but not limited to, discounted cash flow, earnings multiples, peer group comparisons, and sum of the parts. Overall market risk, interest rate risk, and general economic risks impact all securities. Specific information regarding the price target and recommendation is provided in the text of our most recent research report.

Distribution of Investment Ratings. As of March 31, 2021, Baird U.S. Equity Research covered 721 companies, with 64% rated Outperform/Buy, 35% rated Neutral/Hold and 1% rated Underperform/Sell. Within these rating categories, 12% of Outperform/Buy-rated and 3% of Neutral/Hold-rated companies have compensated Baird for investment banking services in the past 12 months and/or Baird managed or co-managed a public offering of securities for these companies in the past 12 months.

Analyst Compensation. Research analyst compensation is based on: (1) the correlation between the research analyst's recommendations and stock price performance; (2) ratings and direct feedback from our investing clients, our institutional and retail sales force (as applicable) and from independent rating services; (3) the research analyst's productivity, including the quality of such analyst's research and such analyst's contribution to the growth and development of our overall research effort; (4) compliance with all of Baird's internal policies and procedures; and (5) other considerations, such as Baird's assessment of the prevailing market rates for talent in the sector the research analyst covers, but excluding the analyst's contributions to Baird's investment banking services activities. This compensation criteria and actual compensation is reviewed and approved on an annual basis by Baird's Research Oversight Committee. Analyst compensation is derived from all revenue sources of the firm, including revenues from investment banking. Baird does not compensate research analysts based on specific investment banking transactions.

A complete listing of all companies covered by Baird U.S. Equity Research and applicable research disclosures can be accessed at <http://www.rwbaird.com/research-insights/research/coverage/research-disclosure.aspx>. You can also call 800-792-2473 or write: Robert W. Baird & Co., Equity Research, 777 E. Wisconsin Avenue, Milwaukee, WI 53202.

Analyst Certification

The senior research analyst(s) certifies that the views expressed in this research report and/or financial model accurately reflect such senior analyst's personal views about the subject securities or issuers and that no part of his or her compensation was, is, or will be directly or indirectly related to the specific recommendations or views contained in the research report.

Disclaimers

Baird prohibits analysts from owning stock in companies they cover.

This is not a complete analysis of every material fact regarding any company, industry or security. The opinions expressed here reflect our judgment at this date and are subject to change. The information has been obtained from sources we consider to be reliable, but we cannot guarantee the accuracy.

ADDITIONAL INFORMATION ON COMPANIES MENTIONED HEREIN IS AVAILABLE UPON REQUEST

The Dow Jones Industrial Average, S&P 500, S&P 400 and Russell 2000 are unmanaged common stock indices used to measure and report performance of various sectors of the stock market; direct investment in indices is not available. Baird is exempt from the requirement to hold an Australian financial services license. Baird is regulated by the United States Securities and Exchange Commission, FINRA, and various other self-regulatory organizations and those laws and regulations may differ from Australian laws. This report has been prepared in accordance with the laws and regulations governing United States broker-dealers and not Australian laws.

Other Disclosures

The information and rating included in this report represent the research analyst's views based on a time horizon of 12 months, as described above, unless otherwise stated. In our standard company-specific research reports, the subject company may be designated as a "Fresh Pick", representing that the research analyst believes the company to be a high-conviction investment idea based on a subjective review of one or more fundamental or quantitative factors until an expiration date specified by the analyst but not to exceed nine months. The Fresh Pick designation and specified expiration date will be displayed in standard company-specific research reports on the company until the occurrence of the expiration date or such time as the analyst removes the Fresh Pick designation from the company in a subsequent, standard company-specific research report. The research analyst(s) named in this report may, at times and at the request of clients or their Baird representatives, provide particular investment perspectives or trading strategies based primarily on the analyst's understanding of the individual client's objectives. These perspectives or trading strategies generally are responsive to client inquiries and based on criteria the research analyst considers relevant to the client. As such, these perspectives and strategies may differ from the research analyst's views contained in this report.

Baird and/or its affiliates may provide to certain clients additional or research supplemental products or services, such as outlooks, commentaries and other detailed analyses, which focus on covered stocks, companies, industries or sectors. Not all clients who receive our standard company-specific research reports are eligible to receive these additional or supplemental products or services. Baird determines in its sole discretion the clients who will

receive additional or supplemental products or services, in light of various factors including the size and scope of the client relationships. These additional or supplemental products or services may feature different analytical or research techniques and information than are contained in Baird's standard research reports. Any ratings and recommendations contained in such additional or research supplemental products are consistent with the research analyst's ratings and recommendations contained in more broadly disseminated standard research reports. Baird disseminates its research reports to all clients simultaneously by posting such reports to Baird's password-protected client portal, <https://bol.rwbaird.com/Login> ("BairdOnline"). All clients may access BairdOnline and at any time. All clients are advised to check BairdOnline for Baird's most recent research reports. After research reports are posted to BairdOnline, such reports may be emailed to clients, based on, among other things, client interest, coverage, stock ownership and indicated email preferences, and electronically distributed to certain third-party research aggregators, who may make such reports available to entitled clients on password-protected, third-party websites. Not all research reports posted to BairdOnline will be emailed to clients or electronically distributed to such research aggregators. To request access to Baird Online, please visit <https://bol.rwbaird.com/Login/RequestInstLogin> or contact your Baird representative.

Dividend Yield. As used in this report, the term "dividend yield" refers, on a percentage basis, to the historical distributions made by the issuer relative to its current market price. Such distributions are not guaranteed, may be modified at the issuer's discretion, may exceed operating cash flow, subsidized by borrowed funds or include a return of investment principal.

United Kingdom ("UK") disclosure requirements for the purpose of distributing this research into the UK and other countries for which Robert W. Baird Limited holds a MiFID passport.

The contents of this report may contain an "investment recommendation", as defined by the Market Abuse Regulation EU No 596/2014 ("MAR"). This report does not contain a "personal recommendation" or "investment advice", as defined by the Market in Financial Instruments Directive 2014/65/EU ("MiFID"). Please therefore be aware of the important disclosures outlined below. Unless otherwise stated, this report was completed and first disseminated at the date and time provided on the timestamp of the report. If you would like further information on dissemination times, please contact us. The views contained in this report: (i) do not necessarily correspond to, and may differ from, the views of Robert W. Baird Limited or any other entity within the Baird Group, in particular Robert W. Baird & Co. Incorporated; and (ii) may differ from the views of another individual of Robert W. Baird Limited.

This material is distributed in the UK and the European Economic Area ("EEA") by Robert W. Baird Limited, which has an office at Finsbury Circus House, 15 Finsbury Circus, London EC2M 7EB and is authorized and regulated by the Financial Conduct Authority ("FCA") in the UK.

For the purposes of the FCA requirements, this investment research report is classified as investment research and is objective. This material is only directed at and is only made available to persons in the EEA who would satisfy the criteria of being "Professional" investors under MiFID and to persons in the UK falling within Articles 19, 38, 47, and 49 of the Financial Services and Markets Act of 2000 (Financial Promotion) Order 2005 (all such persons being referred to as "relevant persons"). Accordingly, this document is intended only for persons regarded as investment professionals (or equivalent) and is not to be distributed to or passed onto any other person (such as persons who would be classified as Retail clients under MiFID).

All substantially material sources of the information contained in this report are disclosed. All sources of information in this report are reliable, but where there is any doubt as to reliability of a particular source, this is clearly indicated. There is no intention to update this report in future. Where, for any reason, an update is made, this will be made clear in writing on the research report. Such instances will be occasional only.

Please note that this report may provide views which differ from previous recommendations made by the same individual in respect of the same financial instrument or issuer in the last 12 months. Information and details regarding previous recommendations in relation to the financial instruments or issuer referred to in this report are available at https://baird.bluematrix.com/sellside/MAR_action.

Robert W. Baird Limited or one of its affiliates may at any time have a long or short position in the company or companies mentioned in this report. Where Robert W. Baird Limited or one of its affiliates holds a long or short position exceeding 0.5% of the total issued share capital of the issuer, this will be disclosed separately by your Robert W. Baird Limited representative upon request.

Investment involves risk. The price of securities may fluctuate and past performance is not indicative of future results. Any recommendation contained in the research report does not have regard to the specific investment objectives, financial situation and the particular needs of any individuals. You are advised to exercise caution in relation to the research report. If you are in any doubt about any of the contents of this document, you should obtain independent professional advice.

Robert W. Baird Limited and Robert W. Baird & Co. Incorporated have in place organisational and administrative arrangements for the prevention, avoidance, and disclosure of conflicts of interest with respect to research recommendations. Robert W. Baird Limited's Conflicts of Interest Policy, available [here](#), outlines the approach Robert W. Baird Limited takes in relation to conflicts of interest and includes detail as to its procedures in place to identify, manage and control conflicts of interest. Robert W. Baird Limited and one of its affiliates may be party to an agreement with the issuer that is the subject of this report relating to the provision of services of investment firms. Robert W. Baird & Co. Incorporated's policies and procedures are designed to identify and effectively manage conflicts of interest related to the preparation and content of research reports and to promote objective and reliable research that reflects the truly held opinions of research analysts. Robert W. Baird & Co. Incorporated's research analysts certify on a quarterly basis that such research reports accurately reflect their personal views.

This material is strictly confidential to the recipient and not intended for persons in jurisdictions where the distribution or publication of this research report is not permitted under the applicable laws or regulations of such jurisdiction.

Robert W. Baird Limited is exempt from the requirement to hold an Australian financial services license and is regulated by the FCA under UK laws, which may differ from Australian laws. As such, this document has not been prepared in accordance with Australian laws.
