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While freight pricing on land transport is steady and even rising, the spot market in ocean shipping is raising the stakes for the peak season

## ROLLER-COASTER ON THE WATER

# HEY, SHIPPER, SPEAK UP

**SINCE THE LATE 1980S**, when personal computers started appearing on every worker's desk, all industries have capitalized on the opportunities technology offers us to do more with less. The quest for efficiency through technology has yielded unprecedented and undoubted productivity gains since then. What many of us haven't seen, however, is the reduction of paper that was promised.

Instead, over the last three decades, we've seen management structures trimmed and more responsibilities and tasks added to the daily functions of senior staff members, leaving them with little time to actually manage their teams, with all that entails, and engage in industry activities that have both direct and indirect effects on their own operations.

Exporters and importers, then, have pushed many of their responsibilities onto their service providers: 3PLs, customs brokers and forwarders.

This outsourcing may allow shippers to handle greater volume than they could otherwise with their thinned staff levels. But exporters and importers remain the beneficial cargo owners and so are responsible for their own goods and all costs associated with the handling of those goods until they have fulfilled contracted delivery terms.

Of course, cargo moving through our ports is subject to the operational procedures and handling routines of the terminal operators, ocean carriers and the relevant government agencies involved. But it's important to remember that any changes in operational procedures and the respective costs associated with those changes usually will be borne by the cargo owners.

For many years now, the Port Authority of New York and New Jersey has been conducting a regular "Port User Group" meeting to engage all parties doing business within the

port. These "PUG" meetings are run by the port's commercial relations manager and are held bimonthly in the vicinity of the port. Running about two hours, the meetings bring together representatives for various ocean carriers, terminal operators, customs brokers, forwarders, drayage operators, as well as agents from U.S. Customs and Border Protection, the Food and Drug Administration, the U.S. Department of Agriculture and other government agencies involved in clearing goods through the port.

Regrettably, very few seats are occupied by the actual owners of the goods under discussion, the shippers who are clearly affected by any and all changes being considered.

I don't know how many other ports around the country have similar forums. But these meetings are excellent opportunities for logistics managers working for the beneficial cargo owner to get in front of the very people that are discussing their freight. They also are excellent opportunities for representatives of the industry's many trade associations to get early access to information that may affect their membership and to speak on behalf of their membership, all of which adds value to their association.

There are more than 7,000 trade associations in the United States, each participating in a variety of activities, including lobbying, advertising and education. But they mainly focus on collaboration between companies and publicly representing the interests of its membership. Their strength generally depends on the level of participation of their members. The more active they are, the stronger the association can be.

Most trade associations have standing committees set up for dealing with specific functions. Individual members will bring prod-

uct and operational issues to the attention of their respective associations and work to resolve problems or improve situations within their own charters and bylaws.

Logistics committees may be filled by transportation professionals from within the trade. Often they include representatives from service providers such as truckers, carriers, warehouses, brokers and other associated members who welcome the opportunity to contribute to the benefit of their customers. These logistics committees provide real, tangible benefits to business and often help drive important change and provide critical information to government agencies about common purposes and common needs of business.

Getting involved in such groups provides participants many benefits, making the effort well worth the investment in time and nominal expense. It allows the participants to address issues of mutual concern, share information and experience with other members, and establish best practices and trade guidelines. It also provides the members with professional development and networking opportunities.

We in the logistics industry are used to hearing a lot of grumbling about the seemingly constant changes in operations and new regulations that confront us on the job. But grumbling is not a solution to any problem or issue.

It is up to the beneficial cargo owner to be its own most trusted, vocal and forceful advocate. Sometimes we just have to get from behind our computer monitors, push aside the piles of paper and take our rightful seats at the table. Take your Blackberry with you if you must. **joc**

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■ By Don Pisano