



GOLD MINING

Unearthing the Value in Freight Audit and Payment Services

No longer a simple accounting function, freight audit and payment services give shippers access to financial data they can dig into for money-saving insights.



Freight audit and payment services have evolved beyond their original function of verifying, correcting, and paying freight bills. As logistics operations become more reliant on data, many shippers now view payment data as a gold mine of insight about their businesses.

Freight audit and payment providers are continually introducing new capabilities in leveraging data to solve shippers' business challenges. For some shippers, the extra help is essential — especially if resources are tight. And some in-house staff may not have the expertise to manage freight payment operations, says Harold B. Friedman, senior vice president, global corporate development, at logistics service provider Data2Logistics, based in Fort Meyers, Fla.

At the same time, managing transportation has become more data-driven. As a result, shippers expect more from their freight audit and payment providers.

"Companies are looking for ways to meet the challenges of today's complex supply chain environment," says Friedman. "They want actionable information and analysis, support in carrier negotiations, and insight into market best practices and industry benchmarks."

Shippers are also looking to level the playing field in carrier contract negotiations. "Historically, carriers have known much more about their business than shippers, and that gave them an unfair advantage," says Friedman. "We help shippers see how carriers are looking at their business, and aid in network optimization and day-to-day transportation decisions."

With fewer resources, tighter budgets, and higher expectations, shippers are relying on freight audit and payment providers for professional services, as well. For example, CTSI-Global, a supply chain management and technology provider in Memphis, Tenn., upgraded its staff and reporting tools to meet shipper demand for analytics-based cost-reduction strategies.

Shippers also have asked Fortigo, an Austin, Texas-based logistics IT services provider, to capture more data elements — even at the item level — and cross-reference

them with other data elements to calculate total landing or total manufacturing costs, according to George Kontoravdis, Fortigo's president.

Shippers also want more frequent attention — processing freight bills daily instead of weekly to accelerate payments and comply with carrier agreements — and a flexible service delivery model so they can access data and reporting tools from tablets and smartphones.

UPGRADED EXPECTATIONS

These shipper expectations have transformed freight audit and payment services. "Rate audits used to just deliver savings and a few reports," says Keith Snavelly, senior vice president, sales and marketing for nVision Global, a McDonough, Ga.-based provider of global freight audit, payment, and logistics management software and services. "While those results are certainly important, the main focus now is creating a central data warehouse that allows shippers to better manage their global supply chain."

At nVision Global, for example, service expansion has included performing freight audit and payment on a global scale, as well as providing data warehousing along

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with data normalization and cleansing. The company also offers supply chain and procurement services, and least-cost carrier applications.

“Shippers can now take advantage of a host of products and services beyond traditional freight audit and payment,” says Snively. “For example, we’re expanding our online analytical tools, as well as some of our supply chain offerings, such as global procurement services. We also developed a new supply chain services group that provides control tower and transportation management capabilities.”

The types of assistance shippers require vary widely. For TTI Floorcare North America of Glenwillow, Ohio, working with a freight audit and payment provider that can offer capabilities such as consolidated reporting is a top priority. In March 2013, the vacuum cleaner manufacturer – maker of Dirt Devil, Royal, and Hoover products – engaged Cleveland, Ohio-based CT Logistics for general audit services, as well as the data and tools to help with budgeting, planning, and evaluating carriers.

“We were looking for a provider that can offer cost savings, accuracy, and a personal touch – a dedicated rep who pays our bills and understands our account,” says Evan Terhar, transportation director for TTI Floorcare.

“CT Logistics’ FreightRater reporting tool has been extremely helpful,” he adds. TTI Floorcare is currently adding international freight invoices to FreightRater.

“When all our freight is integrated into one reporting tool, we’ll combine that data with information from our transportation management system for comparison,” Terhar says.

INTERSECTING WITH TMS

As TTI Floorcare’s experience shows, freight audit and payment intersects with transportation management systems (TMS) in a number of ways. In fact, some freight audit and payment providers also offer

TMS as part of their services. But while TMS solutions are becoming increasingly dynamic, providers caution that they can’t replicate what a freight audit and payment firm can offer.

“Many TMS solutions don’t provide a full audit function – especially not on a global scale,” says Snively. “A TMS traditionally doesn’t capture the vast amounts of data a freight audit and payment provider does. And managing freight audit and payment with a TMS carries labor costs for developers and operators.”

“Using the same provider for both freight audit and payment and TMS is ideal,” says Brian Scott, senior vice president, global

sales, at CTSI-Global. “This approach means shipment data is entered into our system as soon as the freight ships, so the customer doesn’t have to send it to another company for freight payment.”

INVESTING FOR INNOVATION

In addition to offering TMS, freight payment and audit providers are continually investing in new technology to meet the need for granularity.

“We have to keep up with technological advancements in shippers’ systems, as well as within the freight audit and payment industry,” says Tom Zygmunt, manager of marketing at Cass Information Systems, a

Digging For Information

A thorough vetting of both a prospective freight audit and payment provider and its references is key to selecting a partner that will serve your long-term needs. Tom Zygmunt, manager of marketing at Cass Information Systems, a transportation business intelligence provider in Bridgeton, Mo., suggests asking the following questions when researching freight audit and payment partners:

■ **Financial stability and security.** Is the company financially sound and secure? Can it provide audited financial statements?

■ **Customer support.** How are accounts handled? What kind of systems does the company have to help support customers? Are people dedicated to your account?

■ **Electronic data interchange (EDI).** How does the firm handle EDI? Does it have a dedicated EDI team? Is there a dedicated support staff to handle carrier inquiries? What type of automated systems does the company have to provide information to both customers and their carriers? Is there a formal customer relationship management system in place?

■ **Quality control.** Is a formal quality control program in place? Is tracking in place? What is the company’s employee training? Is there a formal process to document how well the services are being performed?

■ **Technology.** Is the company using the latest technology? Does it have the latest hardware and software? What are the firm’s future plans? What type of Internet access does it have? Does the company have room to expand and grow?

■ **Site visits.** Does the facility look neat and orderly? Does it seem documents are handled properly? Does the office have a proper workflow? What general sense do you get of the people you’re going to do business with?

“Lowest price does not always mean lowest cost,” cautions Zygmunt. “You’re purchasing a service that operates daily, and continuous communication is key to success. You must ensure your provider will meet your expectations. It’s more than a service – it’s a partnership.”



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Small Errors Add Up in Parcel Billing

One payment area undergoing more scrutiny than in the past is parcel billing. While many shippers once dismissed this expense as small potatoes compared with the cost of moving containers across an ocean, the sheer volume has many changing their minds – particularly if they’ve gotten involved in e-commerce.

“On motor carrier invoices – such as truckload or less-than-truckload bills – a one-dollar discrepancy may fall within acceptable tolerances,” says Tom Zygmunt, manager of marketing at Cass Information Systems, a transportation business intelligence provider in Bridgeton, Mo. “But on parcel invoices, one million packages that are off by one dollar each total \$1 million in overcharges. It’s especially an issue for large-volume shippers who send millions of packages annually. That represents a real savings opportunity.”

transportation business intelligence provider in Bridgeton, Mo.

CT Logistics is enhancing its technical capabilities with the Logistics Intelligence Optimization Network (LION). Launched

in spring 2013, LION works in conjunction with CT Logistics’ FreightRater to provide shippers with complete supply chain visibility to international freight, and enable intelligent decisions such as

selecting carriers for specific routes, and determining whether to renegotiate contracts or open them up to bid.

“LION facilitates supply chain modeling, as well as planning and execution,” says Allan J. Miner, president of CT Logistics.

Early LION users have seen return on investment within 90 days. “Shippers can view their transportation costs, and determine what they’re managing well and what is out of tolerance,” Miner says. “They can then deploy better solutions and policies to control those costs.”

COMPARE AND CONTRAST

With so much carrier rate data housed within their systems, freight audit and payment providers are ideally situated to offer benchmark data to help shippers understand and negotiate rates.

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Minneapolis, Minn.-based financial services company U.S. Bank is exploring the potential of offering more actionable information and benchmarks to help shippers compare themselves to others in their industry or with similar freight patterns.

Within global companies, different divisions often operate markedly different supply chains, and are better off comparing their freight spend with like shippers than with other internal divisions. That's just one example of how technology refinements can help mine more value out of freight data.

"We work with customers to develop data analysis tools that provide greater insights into their transportation spend," says Kimberle Kennedy, senior vice president, transportation payments, U.S. Bank Freight Payment, a transportation solutions division of U.S. Bank. "Our goal is to help them find meaning in the numbers so they can make better business decisions."

Shippers are requesting an ever-broadening array of data from freight audit and payment providers. For example,

sustainability is a corporate-wide priority at IT storage hardware solutions company EMC Corp., based in Hopkinton, Mass. The company relies on Data2Logistics, its freight audit and payment provider, to furnish data such as carrier mileage, and help ensure that only SmartWay-certified carriers transport its freight.

"Data2Logistics has been very helpful as we expand its freight audit and payment services to our new international manufacturing facility," says Kevin McCay, project manager, EMC Corp. "We get quality data, accessible 24/7 via online tools such as Data2Inform, which allows us to view strategic reports."

THE POWER OF CONCENTRATING SERVICES

As shipper requirements increase, freight audit and payment service providers are adding an array of capabilities to satisfy customers and differentiate their businesses. In addition to delivering benefits associated with each particular service line, concentrating several services with one provider multiplies the advantages.

For example, shippers can use U.S. Bank's pre-audit and invoice processing solution along with supply chain financing to improve payment term management. When shippers choose supply chain financing, U.S. Bank accepts, audits, and pays the invoice immediately on approval, but the shipper doesn't have to pay U.S. Bank for at least 30 days. The carrier improves its day sales outstanding (DSO), and the shipper gains an advantage in days payable outstanding (DPO) — as well as enhancing its value to the carrier through quick payment and fully electronic data.

Working with shippers who choose this type of supply chain financing also benefits carriers by making funds available for investments that support their business, such as new equipment purchases.

"It's an alternative to traditional business funding, such as a working capital line of credit," says U.S. Bank's Kennedy. Carriers consider this approach depending on the way they manage their cash, and how they fund their businesses.

CT Logistics takes a similar position. In addition to LION, the company provides RatePort, a collaborative tool that enables shippers to work with carriers to negotiate contracts, discounts, or delivered costs. That data feeds into the company's FreightRater tool, so that when those shipments occur, the costs are already in the system. FreightRater's execution service then calculates the accruals and cost allocations down to the SKU level.

To support that broad array of services, CT Logistics has expanded its IT staff, professional global capabilities, services, and software offerings. The company is also creating mobile versions of all its applications.

Fortigo is also seeking increased integration. "We're developing a closed-loop audit model," says Kontoravdis. "In addition to receiving and processing freight bills, and feeding them to our customers' systems, we also want active carrier participation. Carrier engagement ensures we provide them with timely updates and get

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their input via regular aging reports. That allows us to verify that the process flows correctly, improve accuracy, detect issues as they occur, and establish a timely payment structure.”

A3 Freight Payment, based in Memphis, Tenn., is one of a few freight payment and audit providers using a proactive resolution model with carriers. “We do not short pay invoices,” says Ross Harris, A3’s CEO. “If we identify an invoice discrepancy, client-dedicated resources get all parties to collaborate to resolve errors prior to settlement.

“This process secures agreement as to the root cause of the error and the steps necessary to permanently correct it,” Harris says.

Once corrected, the billing and reporting data are accurate from that point forward. Typically, about 90 percent of

errors can be eliminated in the first six months of a carrier contract.

GOING GLOBAL

An increasing number of shippers are seeking to apply the services of freight audit and payment providers to shipments between non-U.S. locations, creating a new set of challenges. While countries and markets may differ in metrics, languages, currencies, time zones, measure of weights, distances, and compliance requirements, some fundamental differences can also be difficult to overcome. For example, in some low-wage environments, it’s inexpensive to process freight invoices in-house, so outsourcing may not be cost-effective.

“Other countries may have simpler rate structures than the United States, and in some emerging economies, contracts are

not common — handshake agreements are more typical,” says Harris. “Other jurisdictions may also have tax compliance issues and rules related to inter-country chargebacks, and the presence of a third party can complicate these issues.

“We’ve been able to develop solutions for our clients that create visibility to global spend, and provide locations with tools to maintain and manage the payables process on the ground,” he adds.

Freight audit and payment services are well-established in the United States, but are a newer concept in many markets across the world — although the discipline is catching on among global firms.

“In 2012, our biggest growth areas were Europe and Asia, and many current U.S. customers have started adding service for countries such as Korea, China, and Brazil,



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including moves within the country and region,” says CTSI-Global’s Scott.

PARTNERS FOR THE LONG HAUL

Arvato North America, an international outsourcing service provider with U.S. headquarters in Weaverville, N.C., has a long, trusting relationship with its freight payment and audit service company, CTSI-Global. In fact, the partnership has evolved over 16 years, and CTSI-Global now provides TMS and track-and-trace functions, and handles many reporting and analytics functions Arvato formerly performed in-house.

“Our reserves are slim, so we use CTSI-Global whenever we can,” says Tom

Brissenden, senior manager, logistics, for Arvato. “CTSI-Global’s staff knows this business.”

Most shippers engage freight audit and payment providers intending to establish a long-term partnership like the one Arvato maintains with CTSI-Global. To ensure a suitable match, it’s critical to thoroughly vet potential partners before embarking on a business relationship.

When choosing a freight audit and payment provider, research all the companies you are considering. Start with the following points, and ask plenty of questions (*see sidebar, page 92*).

■ **Try the tools.** Don’t just look at analytics and reporting tools — use them and

get a feel for how they work. Ask references how well the tools meet their needs.

■ **Ensure bonding.** Ask if the organization holds fidelity bond coverage, a type of business insurance that protects employers against financial losses caused by fraudulent or dishonest employee behavior.

■ **Understand pricing.** “If you choose a provider offering fees 50 to 60 percent lower than every other company, you are taking a risk,” says nVision’s Snaveley. “You are placing a bet on your company’s funds.”

Also look for red flags such as separate fees for generating reports, imaging, and electronically transferring funds.

■ **Verify international expertise.** Ask about the provider’s experience in the

The Flip Side: Streamlining Carrier Billing

Resolving discrepancies in freight bills of lading (BOLs) exhausts time and resources on both sides of the transaction. The more a carrier can drive error out of the process, the more accurate BOLs will be, and the less shippers and carriers must spend on reconciliation.

DDC Freight Process Outsourcing (FPO) specializes in digitizing, capturing, and processing freight-critical paperwork, documentation, and associated tasks — essentially streamlining the carrier’s back office. DDC FPO, a division of U.K.-based The DDC Group, helps logistics companies contain costs and enhance administrative efficiencies.

The company began offering FPO in 2005 at the request of a major trucker to assess its system, pinpoint problems, and resolve all related issues. Since then, DDC FPO has grown organically through client referrals, and today processes 20 percent of all less-than-truckload bills in the United States.

Historically, many carriers have manually issued billing from individual terminals, creating severe operations fragmentation. That led to debilitating inefficiencies, higher days sales outstanding (DSO), and a loss of focus from the core business.

DDC FPO develops a custom solution for each carrier. “We learn about their systems and daily processes, then apply our method of quality metrics and standardization to deliver overall efficiency and cost containment for immediate, tangible results,” says Chad Crotty, vice president of business development at DDC FPO. “We do all that while maintaining and improving accuracy rates and quality of work.”

These services drive out errors, reducing the DSO on all the carrier’s bills, and cutting time required for correction. That’s critical in an industry with slim margins, high turnover, and a lengthy learning curve in the billing department.

“Our customers face continually rising labor and healthcare costs,” says Crotty. “Our solution provides protection against those challenges over the long term, which gives them a competitive advantage and sends more money to the bottom line.”

To support fluctuation in billing volumes, DDC FPO also offers flexible staffing achieved by shifting the workload through eight processing facilities in the Philippines. The company also invests in new technologies to ensure high-quality capture and quick turnaround times.

Recently, DDC FPO added *Intelligent Capture* powered by Brainware, a software that sorts paper and electronic documents, lifts critical information based on context, validates findings, then seamlessly relays data to core business applications. “It replaces the traditional rules-based approach with an advanced pattern recognition technique; it works like the human mind,” says Crotty.

“We are constantly innovating for the same reason we support dedicated organizations such as the American Trucking Associations and SMC³,” adds Art Zipkin, president, DDC FPO. “We are investing in the future of this industry. We admire the work and commitment of trucking professionals, and we want to see them succeed.”

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countries where you do business, and how it handles language differences.

- **Watch out for co-mingling.** Ensure the provider maintains dedicated accounts for each shipper, and does not co-mingle shipper funds.

- **Look deep.** Understand the provider's processes and controls, and how they are organized.

- **Consult carriers.** Providers are not the only information source. Consider approaching carriers for their views — you may be able to find out which providers pay on time, whose processes are best at resolving discrepancies, and who helps carriers find and correct the source of the problem to head off future issues. Even with long-term freight payment and audit relationships in place, it's a good idea to periodically pose these questions to carriers.

POST-SELECTION STEPS

Once you've chosen a provider, the following steps will help ensure a successful experience:

- **Run a pilot.** This test lets both sides know what they're working with, to ensure there is a fit. "Setting up a freight audit is time-consuming and requires commitment from the shipper," says Fortigo's Kontoravdis. "If you aren't currently using freight audit and payment services, a small pilot project would be a reality check about the type of effort required."

For example, sometimes new users believe they have carrier contracts in place, but when they start preparing for audit, they discover the contracts have expired, requiring new negotiations.

- **Ensure good project management.** Managers must understand current processes, such as which divisions operate in a distributed model and which are centralized.

- **Perform field ROI analysis.** "The pricing model you pick for the freight audit provider is tied to the ROI you realize," Kontoravdis explains. "Sometimes, a transaction-based model is better. Other times,

Reliability You Can Bank On

When outsourcing freight billing, some shippers find it reassuring to work with a financial institution such as U.S. Bank, because it is subject to the regulatory oversight placed on the banking industry in the United States and across the globe.

"Strict requirements define how we manage customer information and money," says Kimberle Kennedy, senior vice president, transportation payments, at U.S. Bank Freight Payment, a transportation solutions division of the Minneapolis, Minn.-based financial services company.

"Shippers have a solid foundation for passing information and funds to facilitate an invoice processing solution because of the stringent requirements we place on ourselves, as well as the stringent requirements the regulatory agencies place on us."

The company's blend of logistics, technology, and banking expertise allow it to satisfy both accounting and procurement data needs. "We understand financial concepts such as reconciling and accrual," Kennedy explains. "We will make sure companies get the information their accounting systems need, while enabling them to use the data in their procurement process."

gainsharing is better. You don't know until you get down to the details."

- **Clearly define the scope and deliverables.** Global shippers, in particular, need to agree on what will happen in each phase of the project. "They also need to understand the differences between freight audit

and freight payment, which are not always immediately clear," says Kontoravdis. "It might make sense for the shipper to pay the bills because of internal controls, processes, or guidelines."

- **Ask for carrier report cards.** Data2Logistics issues quarterly report cards detailing each carrier's performance and compliance. "You can see who is delivering on time, whether they provide proper documentation, and if they are billing accurately," notes Friedman.

- **Use providers for detailed requests for proposal (RFPs).** Data2Logistics works extensively with clients to create comprehensive RFPs. "These documents are key to understanding carriers' capabilities, and ensure they're bidding on lanes they can handle," says Friedman. "A lot more work goes into good RFPs than people think. We encourage shippers to provide detailed information about their shipping requirements, and to also drill down into carrier capabilities. Choosing a carrier involves more than just price. The ability to provide service performance is equally important."

- **Get buy-in for global expansion.** Because freight audit and payment is a fairly new discipline to those outside North America, make sure you have true buy-in from non-U.S. divisions before expanding those services to them.

"A small location in Europe may not receive the full benefit of freight audit and payment, but having all the company's shipment data in a global data warehouse does serve the greater good of the business," says Snavelly.

CHOOSE WISELY

Once considered an accounting — rather than supply chain — function, freight audit and payment has evolved considerably to become a key part of many shippers' accounting, logistics, and IT operations. As such, it's critical for shippers to choose partners carefully and fully understand — and take advantage of — all the capabilities they now provide. ■



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