Putting Shipping Data to Its Best Use

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In today's economy, supply chain executives need to be able to obtain certain data at a moment's notice. Unfortunately, many global companies are not obtaining or using complete and accurate data. Perhaps worse, companies that are maintaining good data often are not making the most out of it.

How can supply chain executives find out if the data they are using is accurate, or if they are really getting all of the data they require to compete in today's market? And once they know the data they're receiving is good and solid, how can they know whether they're making the most of it?

The first step to determining whether your data is accurate and complete is to identify the information that you need.

Supply chain executives need the following at their fingertips: their total supply chain spend; all exceptions for shipments that did not follow the company's routing guidelines; shipments that will have delays in transit; and information that allows them to predict and combat unforeseen increases in expense.

Once you have determined the kind of information you need, it will then be necessary to ensure the data is presented in a precise and timely fashion. The easiest way to go about doing this is by putting in place a sensible checks and balances system that will allow you to consistently micromanage your data.

When it comes supply chain management and optimization, those who micromanage their data have a significant edge. If your data uncovers issues that you can see and take care of immediately, you can address those issues and the problems that trickle down the supply chain because of them, thereby eliminating further damage.

The good news is that putting in place a checks and balances system doesn't require reinventing the wheel. For some companies, the easiest way to put a checks and balances system in place is to go through an established third party with the ability to monitor data that comes in directly from carriers.

A strong advantage here is that a reputable third party can help ensure data is presented in an unbiased manner.

While every company likes to think its staff members can interpret data with an objective eye, the truth is staff members are human; without intending to do so, they may present data in such a way that shields certain problem areas or

departmental shortcomings. Incomplete, inaccurate or skewed reports help no one in the end. On the upside, complete, accurate and unbiased reports can prevent things like unexpected higher logistics expense, and even layoffs.

A trusted third party should also be able to handle the difficult task of mapping out and interpreting unstructured data and creating out of it a structured data set. An exceptional third party should be able to import this data set into a tool that cleans the data and allows it to reside in a place where it can be used alongside your other data without issue.

Once a reliable checks and balances system has been implemented, ensuring you receive your data in a timely manner should be relatively easy. Depending on your company's unique needs, set up reports to be delivered to the appropriate parties daily, weekly or monthly. Keep in mind that receiving real-time scans while a shipment is in transit will allow you to be able to foresee service disruptions and rectify them before they become a problem.

Finally, to make sure that you are making the most out of your data, make sure you can answer each of the following questions: As of today, do you know your total supply chain spend? Are you aware of all shipment exceptions caused by routing guide non-compliance? Can you reasonably foresee which shipments will have delays in transit? Have you been able to reduce or eliminate excess charges?

If you answered no to any of those questions, go back and look at your processes in order to find out where they may have been missteps. Chances are that the information you need is either not being made available to you, not accurate, or not being reported in an unbiased and timely manner. If you use a third party, hold them accountable for any discrepancies you might find.

Once you locate the missing link, you will be able to repair the other links in your supply chain before they affect your logistics budgets, and ultimately, your company's bottom line.

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