Further tales of the drayman

MOVING RIGHT ALONG

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The drayage, or local trucking company, is a critical link in the intermodal service chain. When considering local drayage, most people concentrate on the local pickup and delivery involved in making rail intermodal a viable alternative to a truckload motor carrier. There is, however, an equally important aspect of intermodal drayage — trucking to and from ocean marine terminals.

There is a natural inclination to think about rail-truck moves when discussing intermodal. However, almost every loaded container entering or leaving this country is intermodal because it has at least one truck movement between the customer and the ocean terminal. Even containers moving by rail intermodal have at least one truck movement somewhere along the route.

Local drayage firms have a plethora of challenges confronting them. But truckers serving marine terminals have all of those problems — and more.

The difficulties have probably received more attention on the West Coast, especially Southern California, but they pervade the country. The status of these truckers warrants further review because it presents, in a microcosm, all the issues plaguing the intermodal industry today.

Specifically, the steamship industry has to face its own responsibility for creating — and overcoming — these problems.

Truckers serving steamship lines are often perceived as bottom-dwellers. As in most industrial trades, there exists a "pecking order." In the trucking community, drayage companies handling marine terminal business rank below domestic intermodal carriers, long-haul drivers and unionized truckers.

Mostly they drive equipment discarded by other truckers because it is cheaper. They are very often recent immigrants who lack political influence to protect themselves.

Add to that the common knowledge that steamship lines are notoriously cheap. A rate increase request of $5 is often met with outraged cries of indignation.

Lines that spend millions of dollars bolstering their image think nothing of allowing a decrepit tractor to pull their brand new container — with upward of a million dollars worth of merchandise.

Steamship lines are doing nothing to address the problems of equipment safety. Safety of equipment on the highways is a national issue, and the threat of federal government action is real. Other intermodal shippers and equipment owners have become actively involved, but steamship lines refuse to address the issue.

The shipping industry is repeating all the problems it caused with the Intermodal Safe Container Act. Ship lines refuse to respond to the great concern of trucking vendors, and when the federal government moves to address this public safety concern, the shipping industry actively engages in blocking implementation.

Beyond the safety and regulatory reasons, it makes commercial sense to work with the draymen. Today, steamship lines face precarious financial times due to the imbalance between import and export volume. The search for export business has become so frenzied that customers may choose their rates and conditions. Ironically, steamship lines are refusing to enlist a valuable ally in this search for export cargo — the local drayman.

In many cases, the strained relationship between steamship line and drayman is the opposite of the very close relationship between the trucker and the customer.

For refrigerated cargo — the most desirable export cargo — the trucker is a key player. He must pick up an empty, bring it to the fields for loading, and return it to the steamship line in time to meet the export cutoff.

Except in the rare times of peak export surge, there is more equipment than business. Very often, truckers will direct the customer to use a specific line — or more likely — not to use a specific line.

As badly as steamship lines treat the draymen, terminals treat them even worse. Since most truckers get paid in piecework, not by the hour, they cannot afford the hours of delay commonly necessary to make one round trip through a terminal. Yet they cannot complain out of fear that terminals will retaliate with further delays.

The American Trucking Associations has begun to rate marine and intermodal terminals. Out of the hundreds of terminals in the United States, only five were rated highly. This procedure is long overdue. Fortunately, the ATA has the political strength to withstand terminal pressures.

Several years ago, a similar exercise was conducted in Southern California. The results were very interesting. The highest rated terminals weren't the newest — or the fanciest. Some were old, but just well-managed.

One terminal that thought it was the best — but was rated last — threatened lawsuits to block release of the results. It needed to have been so desperate. The truckers — and therefore the customers — already knew what a mess the terminal was. The efforts denying the truth would have been better spent solving the problems that made life so difficult for the truckers — and their common customers.

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