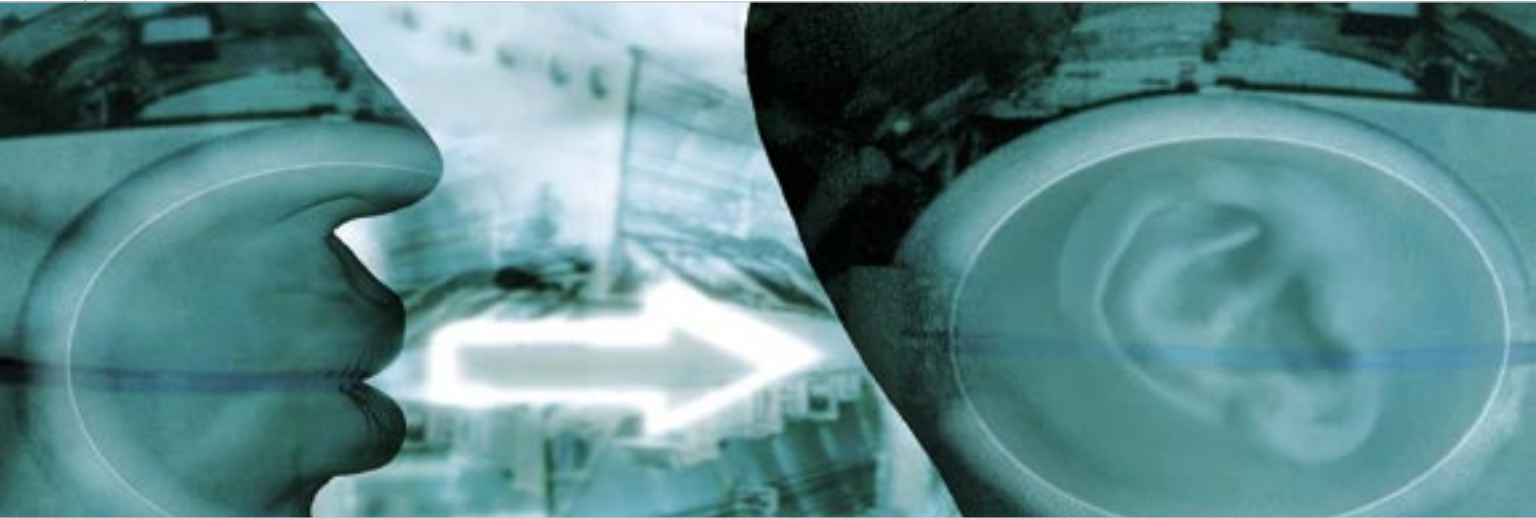


# IMPROVING YOUR CARRIER RELATIONSHIPS



## Shippers' involvement with carrier representatives are among the top sources of dissatisfaction

By Tim Sailor

In this final part of our series on common frustrations shippers experience with their carriers, we will discuss relationships with carrier representatives. Although shippers are generally pleased with the carriers' overall service performance, they are often disappointed with their basic account management.

We once worked with a rep that was chronically unresponsive. After several weeks with no return calls, he finally responded with, "I wanted to give you some pre-follow-up and let you know that I don't have any answers for you yet." To this day, I still don't know what pre-follow-up is.

At some point, most shippers have had a similar experience. In our *PARCEL* survey, 52% of shippers said their reps do not follow up; 35% had no ability to escalate issues; and for 40%, it seems like they are always getting to know and train new reps.

Why is this relationship so important? Most shippers primarily rely on their carrier reps to resolve service issues. And, depending on whether the rep is "good" or "bad," shippers experience very different levels of service, pricing and frustrations.

Good sales reps are experts at navigating their companies' internal resources and know right where to go to resolve issues and complaints. These reps are invaluable to shippers. On the other

hand, many reps don't know where to turn or haven't developed internal relationships within their own organizations.

For shippers, the number one frustration is a lack of follow-up. While the carriers are all quite good at delivering packages and providing real-time shipment status information, there is significant room for improvement with resolving billing issues, claims, automation requests, past dues, refunds and the many other areas that shippers need help with. The most effective way to manage follow-up is to use email. Email automatically gives you a paper trail of when and what you requested and is very useful in keeping track of open issues.

You should establish reasonable timelines and deadlines for resolution. Typically, reps do not give you timelines up front and will tell you that they don't know how long it will take. Have your rep agree to regularly update you. Always ask them what they have done and with whom have they spoken. Document these contacts as it will help you develop your own carrier resources down the road. Finally, if you have a history of poor follow-up from your rep, copy in managers and senior carrier contacts.

A lot of shippers don't feel that they can escalate service issues beyond their reps. This is a mistake. Even if you have an exceptional rep, overall service suffers when you rely solely on your sales rep to manage service levels.

When you involve managers at the sales, operational and customer service levels, it provides both you and your sales rep with a much greater support network. If possible, engage these other carrier resources before you request any problem resolution. Get direct phone numbers and email addresses. We have found it helpful for the carriers to disclose their internal resources prior to being awarded the business. At a minimum, any RFP should ask for phone numbers and resources for billing problems, claims, international and customs issues as well as automation requests.

Facility tours are also an effective way to broaden your interactions with your carriers. Not only will you learn more about their operations, but it will give you a chance to meet the “hands on” people.

We also recommend that you conduct regular business reviews with your carriers. In addition to your sales rep, include your carriers’ operations and customer service representatives that handle your traffic. These meetings are a good opportunity for you to proactively discuss your service requirements and expectations, as well as any service improvements.

### Turnover Creates Issues

Another major issue in the shipper/carrier relationship is sales rep turnover. Over 40% of shippers feel that they are continually training and educating carrier reps on their service requirements. Both shippers and carriers recognize how important a good rep can be. However, most good reps get promoted and move on to work for their companies in new capacities. While this benefits the carriers, shippers suffer in this transition.

What can you do? For starters, insist on a transition period where you can work with both the new and the old reps. Ensure that the outgoing rep shares his or her internal resources with you and the new rep. Proactively communicate your requirements and service expectations to your new rep. Let them know how often you want to see them, response times and any special considerations that are important to you.

If your volume warrants it, consider requesting a National Account or Global Account rep. These reps are generally more experienced and have better tools and resources than the other reps. Finally, if you have done a good job reaching out to other carrier managers and personnel, rely on them.

For any relationship to work, it must be a win/win. For most shippers, a win is when your rep provides competitive pricing and value-added resources, is responsive to your requests and keeps you up-to-date on new services and capabilities.

Most carrier reps primarily want to continually increase shipments and revenue (i.e., commissions) and are likely to respond well to recognition. If appropriate, compliment them in front of their managers or offer to be a reference for new business opportunities.

Given that the carriers move tens of millions of shipments each day, we all know that there will be ongoing problems, service failures and miscommunications. However, if you can utilize some of these strategies, both you and your sales rep will work together more effectively. I look forward to hearing your success stories!

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