

Global Shipping: Choosing the Best Method of Transport

When shipping freight internationally, it's important to choose the appropriate mode of transportation to ensure your products arrive on time and at the right cost. Your decision to ship by land, sea, or air depends on a careful evaluation of business needs and a comparison of the benefits each method affords. Picking the best possible mode of transportation is critical to export success.

Shipping by truck

Shipping by truck is a popular method of freight transport used worldwide, though speed and quality of service decline outside of industrialized areas. Even if you choose to ship your products by sea or air, a truck is usually responsible for delivering the goods from the port of arrival to their final destination.

When shipping by truck, the size of your shipment will determine whether you need less-than-truckload (LTL) or truckload (TL) freight. LTL involves smaller orders, and makes up the majority of freight shipments. The average piece of LTL freight weighs about 1,200 pounds and is the size of a single pallet. However, LTL freight can range from 100 to 15,000 pounds. Beyond this limit, your shipment is likely to be classified as truckload freight. It is more economical for large shipments to utilize the space and resources of a single motor carrier, instead of being mixed with other shipments and reloaded into several different vehicles along the route. TL providers generally charge a 'per mile' rate, which can vary depending on distance, items being shipped, equipment, and service times.

Some businesses work with brokers to receive larger discounts. Others save money by delivering freight directly to a carrier terminal, which eliminates various surcharges associated with picking up the delivery from its point of origin.

Shipping by rail

Shipping via rail is another popular option, especially when transporting over large distances or when shipping bulk goods. Rail is commonly used as part of an intermodal chain to bring products to a port for international export, or from ports to a final destination. Because many rail shipments must be transferred to cargo ships, motor carriers, or planes, there is often a transshipment cost involved. Businesses reduce these costs and expedite shipping times by using containers which are easily moved from one mode to another.

Although rail is not as flexible as road transport, it can be cheaper and more energy efficient under certain circumstances, especially when long distances are involved. If you are shipping bulk commodity items such as ore or grain, rail tends to be the most convenient option. Specialized freight cars allow bulk products to be poured or dropped for easy transport. Refrigerated cars and containers are available for perishable freight, and liquid cargo can be stored in tank cars.

If your business is located close to a railhead, it may be cost-effective to use the railroad to get your freight to its next destination, whether it is a port, carrier terminal, or the customer's doorstep.

Shipping by air

Shipping by air is the best option for time-sensitive exports. Other advantages include lower insurance, inexpensive warehousing, and tighter inventory control. However, air freight is more expensive than sea or land and is limited by the availability of major airports nearby the points of departure and arrival. The cost of air freight is largely determined by the weight of your cargo and how quickly you need it to arrive. Heavier, time-sensitive freight will be the most costly.

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For more information, please contact us at:

Phone: 1-212-560-1919 • Fax: 1-212-560-1920

Email: sales@thomasglobal.com • www.thomasglobal.com

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Some shipping companies offer pick-up services depending on the size of your shipment, while others hold you responsible for transporting the cargo to the terminal. Air freight can accommodate heavy freight, and most companies do not impose size limits. It is advisable to insure your air freight, especially if it is valuable - and air freight usually is. Air freight insurance rates are affordable and a great safety measure to ensure peace of mind.

Many modern air freight companies give you the opportunity to track your goods using web-based technology. This means you can follow the status of your cargo from departure to arrival and stay on top of necessary information.

Shipping by sea

International exports are most often transported by sea. If you are moving a large shipment that does not require an especially fast delivery, sea transport is the most economical option. There are a large variety of specialized ships that can accommodate everything from bulk commodities to liquids, perishable items, and dry goods. The type of cargo ship used to transport your freight depends on the items you are shipping.

Transit times can vary depending on specific port locations, but a shipment moving from a European port to a United States port generally takes 10-12 days depending on nautical and weather conditions.

Containerization is a shipping technique that now dominates most modes of transportation, and sea transport is no exception. Freight is first packaged securely and then loaded into shipping containers, also called isotainers. These containers allow for a quick transition of freight between different vehicles in the intermodal transport chain. Ships, railroad cars, planes, and trucks are now all designed to accommodate containers intact.

Choosing the best method

Each mode of freight transport has its own unique advantages. Choosing an appropriate method is heavily dependent on distance, the geographic location of your destination, the nature of your items, your budget, and any necessary deadlines or schedules that must be adhered to.

Items that must be moved quickly should be shipped by air, while goods that aren't needed in a hurry can be shipped inexpensively by sea. Most shipping routes often require the use of several different modes of transport. Finding the best way to coordinate this logistic chain can save your business a lot of time and money in the long run.

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