

A large container ship is docked at a port, with several blue gantry cranes visible in the background. The ship is loaded with colorful containers. The sky is a clear blue with some light clouds. The overall scene is industrial and maritime.

# The trade data playbook

*How freight forwarders and 3PLs find and win clients in 2026*

# Practical, not theoretical

This is a short, practical guide for anyone in logistics who has to find their own customers. By the end, you will know:

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01 Why prospecting is the hardest part of the job, and why that is getting worse, not better

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02 What trade and shipment data actually contains, and how much of it is public

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03 How to turn that data into a short, ranked list of real prospects

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04 Which signals tell you a company is ready to switch providers

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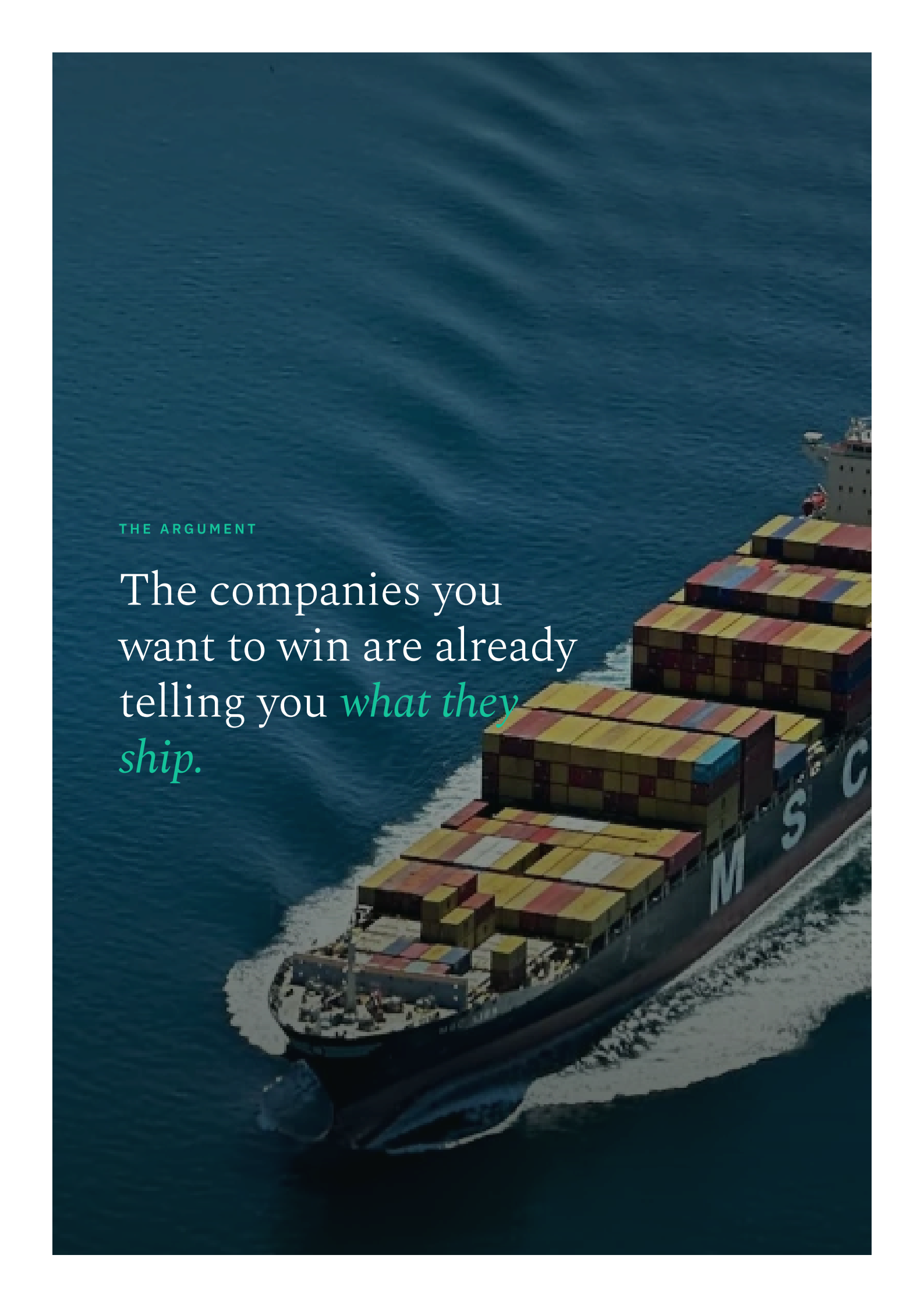
05 How to write outreach that gets a reply instead of a delete

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06 How to package the same data into lead magnets of your own

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*No theory for its own sake. Every section is something you can use this week.*



THE ARGUMENT

The companies you  
want to win are already  
telling you *what they  
ship.*

# Table of contents

01	Introduction: <i>the question every forwarder is still guessing at</i>	05
02	Why finding shippers is the hardest job in logistics	06
03	The data goldmine hiding in plain sight	08
04	Turning shipment data into a target list	10
05	Worked example: <i>finding one shipper, start to finish</i>	11
06	The signals that mean a company needs you now	12
07	Writing outreach that actually lands	13
08	Turning insight into lead magnets of your own	14
09	Your first week: a checklist	15
10	A quick glossary	16
11	Where the data and the workflow live	17

# The question every forwarder is still guessing at

One question has followed the freight forwarding industry since it began: How do you find shippers?

Most companies still answer it the way they did twenty years ago. They use directories, referrals, trade shows, and a sales rep working a list of names that may or may not ship anything at all.

This guide makes a simple argument: The companies you want to win are already telling you what they ship, where they ship it, how much, and who they currently use. That information exists. A lot of it is public, and almost nobody in logistics sales is using it well.

The forwarders and 3PLs that learn to read it will spend less time guessing and more time talking to companies that actually have freight to move.

## WHO THIS IS FOR

Freight forwarders, 3PLs, NVOCCs, and customs brokers who sell their own services and want a steadier way to fill the pipeline.

# Why finding shippers is the hardest job in logistics

## TAKEAWAYS

- ◆ The market is large and growing, which means more competition, not less.
- ◆ Rate volatility keeps shipper relationships in play all year.
- ◆ Most forwarders still prospect by guessing, which is slow and wasteful.

Logistics is a big market. The global third-party logistics market is estimated at roughly 1.22 trillion dollars in 2026, according to Mordor Intelligence, and it is forecast to keep growing. Freight forwarding sits inside that, and it grew even through a turbulent 2025, according to Transport Intelligence.

**\$1.22T**

Estimated global third-party logistics market in 2026 (Mordor Intelligence)

**~11,000**

Active licensed customs brokers in the United States (International Trade Administration)

A growing market sounds like good news. The catch is that it attracts competitors. In the United States alone, there are around 11,000 active licensed customs brokers, according to the International Trade Administration, and many also operate as forwarders. When a shipper has that many options, the lazy way to win the business is to undercut on rate. That is a race nobody wins for long.

Volatility makes it harder still. Ocean rates rarely sit still, and when they move, shippers start rethinking the setup they signed last year.

BY THE NUMBERS · LATE MAY 2026

**\$2,712** Drewry's World Container Index, per 40ft container, up for three straight weeks

**\$4,082** Shanghai to Genoa, up roughly 10 percent in a single week

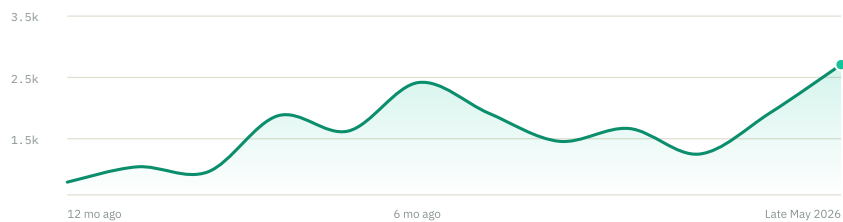
**\$2,773** Shanghai to Rotterdam, up roughly 15 percent in a single week

Carriers are running dozens of blank sailings across major East to West lanes to manage capacity. Source: Drewry World Container Index

When rates swing like that, the relationship a shipper signed last year may not fit the market they are in this quarter. For you, that means the door opens more often than you would think.

The problem is that most forwarders cannot see who is behind that open door. They prospect by guesswork. Pick a sector, build a list of company names, and hope some of them import. Here is what that costs compared to working from data:

	GUESSING	READING THE DATA
<b>Who you target</b>	Companies you think might import	Companies you can see are importing now
<b>Timing</b>	Whenever you happen to call	When their volumes or lanes are changing
<b>First line of outreach</b>	Generic pitch about your services	A specific, true detail about their freight
<b>Hit rate</b>	Low and hard to predict	Higher, and it improves as you learn the signals



— A line chart of the World Container Index over the last 12 months. Ocean spot rates rarely sit still, which keeps shipper relationships in play.

# The data goldmine hiding in plain sight

## TAKEAWAYS

- ◆ Most international shipments leave a record, and a lot of it is public.
- ◆ One record can name the importer, the product, the volume, and the carrier.
- ◆ This is the same data that the specialist trade tools are built on.

Here is the part most logistics salespeople never internalize. When goods cross a border, they create paperwork, and a large share of that paperwork becomes data you can search.

In the United States, every ocean import is documented on a Bill of Lading filed with Customs and Border Protection. Much of it is public. Trade intelligence providers like Descartes Datamyne collect it, clean it, and release it about 24 hours after Customs receives it, with records going back to 2004.

A single Bill of Lading record can tell you:

- The importer of record, meaning the company you can sell to
- The foreign supplier they bought from
- The product, described and tagged with an HS code
- The volume, in containers or weight
- The carrier that moved it

Read that list again, because it is the whole game. The record tells you who is importing, what they import, how much, from where, and who currently handles it. That is everything you need to qualify a prospect, sitting in a database instead of locked inside the buyer's head.

This is not a fringe idea. Trade data platforms exist precisely because logistics companies and customs brokers use them to find new shippers. The data has been around for years. What most teams have been missing is a practical way to turn it into outreach.

## ANATOMY OF A RECORD

BILL OF LADING · US OCEAN IMPORT		CBP · released ~24h	
<b>IMPORTER OF RECORD</b> Harborview Home Furnishings LLC	<b>A</b>	<b>FOREIGN SUPPLIER</b> Mekong Woodcraft Co., Ltd.	
<b>PRODUCT · HS CODE</b> Wooden seating & furniture 9401.61	<b>B</b>	<b>VOLUME</b> 4 × 40ft HC · 31,200 kg	<b>C</b>
<b>ORIGIN PORT</b> Cat Lai, Ho Chi Minh City (VN)	<b>D</b>	<b>CARRIER</b> Evergreen Marine	<b>E</b>

**A Importer name.** The company you can sell to.

**B Product and HS code.** What they move, classified.

**C Volume.** Containers or weight, the account size.

**D Origin port.** The lane they currently run.

**E Carrier.** Who currently handles the freight.

- An annotated Bill of Lading record with callouts on importer name, product and HS code, volume, origin port, and carrier. One record, five things you can sell against.

# Turning shipment data into a target list

## TAKEAWAYS

- ◆ Start from the lanes and cargo you already serve well.
- ◆ Filter to companies shipping there now, then rank by volume.
- ◆ A company name is not a contact. Find the decision maker.

A database of millions of records is useless until you narrow it. The mistake is to start broad. Start from what you are good at, then work outwards.

**Step one: define your lanes and cargo.** You already know the lanes where you have capacity, rates, and a track record. Maybe that is Asia to the US West Coast, or reefer cargo out of Latin America. Write those down. They are your filter.

**Step two: pull the companies shipping there now.** Use trade data to list the importers and exporters moving cargo through your lanes and product categories. This is where the work changes. You are no longer guessing who might import. You are looking at companies that demonstrably do.

**Step three: rank by volume and pattern.** Not every active shipper is worth your time. Sort by volume, frequency, and consistency. A company moving steady monthly volume on your lane beats one with a single shipment last year. Volume also hints at how much the account is worth before you make contact.

**Step four: find the right person.** A company name is not a contact. You need the person who owns logistics decisions, plus a verified email or phone number. This is where most data-driven prospecting stalls, because the record names the company but not the buyer. Closing that gap, from company to named decision-maker to verified contact, is the difference between a list and a pipeline.

The result is a short, ranked list of companies that ship what you handle, where you handle it, at a volume worth pursuing, with a real person to call.

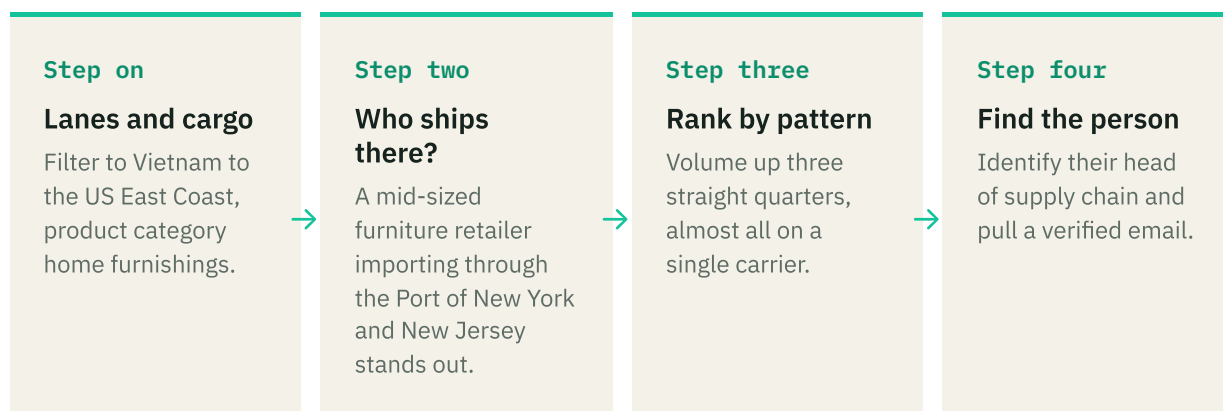
# Finding one shipper, start to finish

## TAKEAWAYS

- ◆ The four steps take minutes, not days, once the data is in one place.
- ◆ The output is one specific company and one specific reason to call.

Here is the method applied to a single prospect. The company is invented, but the steps are exactly what you would do.

**The setup.** You run a weekly ocean service from Vietnam into the US East Coast, and you want more furniture and home goods accounts.



Their volume has climbed for three straight quarters, and almost all of it moves through a single carrier. Growing volume plus single carrier dependence is exactly the profile of a company starting to feel strain.

U

**The outreach**

One line they cannot ignore

DRAFT

"Your East Coast furniture volume out of Vietnam has grown three quarters running, almost all on one carrier, right as blank sailings hit that lane this spring. That concentration is worth a second option, and it is a route we run weekly."

Total time, once your data and contacts live in one place: a few minutes. Compare that to an afternoon of guessing which retailers might import.

# The signals that mean a company needs you now

## TAKEAWAYS

- ◆ Timing beats targeting. The right company at the wrong moment still says no.
- ◆ Shipment data exposes change, and change is when buyers switch.
- ◆ A few signals reliably flag a company in play.

Knowing who the target is. Knowing when they will switch is timing, and timing is what turns a good list into a closing one. Because trade data updates continuously, it shows you the change. Change is when a shipper reconsiders.

SIGNAL	WHAT IT USUALLY MEANS	WHY IS IT YOUR OPENING
<b>Volume is climbing month over month</b>	The company is outgrowing its current setup	Growth is when incumbents drop balls, and shippers seek capacity
<b>A new origin country or lane</b>	A new supplier and an unfamiliar route	They need a forwarder who knows that lane
<b>Heavy reliance on one carrier</b>	Concentration risk	After a season of blank sailings, resilience is top of mind
<b>Erratic or declining volume</b>	Possible trouble with the current provider	A careful, well-read outreach can win the second look

The point is not to chase every signal. It is to let the data flag the small number of accounts in motion, and to spend your outreach there.



### Volume climbing

Outgrowing the current setup.



### New origin or lane

A new supplier, an unfamiliar route.



### One-carrier reliance

Concentration risk on the lane.



### Erratic volume

Possible trouble with the provider.

# Writing outreach that actually lands

## TAKEAWAYS

- ◆ Lead with what you know about their freight, not with who you are.
- ◆ One specific, accurate detail beats a paragraph of flattery.
- ◆ Accuracy matters most. A wrong detail does more harm than no detail.

You can have the perfect list and the perfect timing and still lose it in the first line. Most logistics outreach opens with the sender talking about themselves. Who they are, how long they have been around, and what they offer. The reader has seen that email a hundred times and deletes it.

Trade data lets you do the opposite. Open with the prospect's own reality, because you can see it.

## GENERIC, DELETABLE

*"We are a full-service freight forwarder with over twenty years of experience and competitive ocean and air rates." It says nothing. It could have gone to anyone.*

## DATA-INFORMED, HARD TO IGNORE

"I noticed your team has moved steady volume from Ningbo into Long Beach over the last two quarters, mostly on one carrier. With the blank sailings on that lane this spring, that concentration is worth a look, and it is a route we run weekly." That email could only have been written to one company.

## FOR A DIFFERENT SIGNAL

"You started importing out of Vietnam this year, a lane that trips up a lot of teams on documentation and transit time. Happy to share what we have learned running it weekly, no pitch."

One caution matters more than any tip. The moment you personalize from data, accuracy becomes critical. Tell a prospect they import from a country they left months ago, or name the wrong product, and you have proven the opposite of what you intended. You look careless. So the data behind your outreach has to be current and verified before it goes out. Personalization built on stale data is worse than none.

Keep the rest short. Say the one relevant thing, make a single clear ask, and stop. The first message is for a reply, not a sale.

# Turning insight into lead magnets of your own

## TAKEAWAYS

- ◆ The strongest lead magnets use data that the reader cannot easily get.
- ◆ Generic guides get ignored. Specific, data-backed assets get opened.

This guide is itself a lead magnet, which is any piece of value you trade for a prospect's attention. Most logistics lead magnets fail for the same reason most cold emails fail. They are generic. A broad guide to supply chain best practices needs no real data and could have come from anyone.

The ones that work are built on something the reader cannot assemble alone. With trade data, you can make several:

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### 01 A lane benchmark.

Current and historical rate and volume trends for the lanes your prospects care about, as a short report.

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### 02 A sector snapshot.

Who is importing what in a given industry and region, and how the volumes are shifting.

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### 03 An account teardown.

The strongest and most personal version. A short, honest read of one prospect's shipping setup and where it carries cost or risk.

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*Specific and data-backed beats broad and generic, every time.*

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# Your first week: a checklist

A simple way to start: one step a day.

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- DAY 1** Write down your three to five best lanes and the cargo types you handle well.

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- DAY 2** Pull the list of companies actively shipping in those lanes.

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- DAY 3** Rank the top 20 by volume and consistency. Cut the rest for now.

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- DAY 4** For your top 10, identify the logistics decision maker and find a verified contact.

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- DAY 5** Find one signal per account (growth, new lane, carrier concentration) and write one specific opener each.

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At the end of the week, you have **10 personalized, well-timed outreaches** instead of a generic blast. Repeat it weekly, and it becomes a pipeline.

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# A quick glossary

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**Bill of Lading (BOL)**

The document filed for a cargo shipment. For US ocean imports, much of it is public.

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**HS code**

Harmonized System code, the standard number that classifies a traded product.

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**TEU**

Twenty-foot equivalent unit, the standard way to measure container volume.

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**Consignee**

The party receiving the goods, usually the importer.

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**Importer of record**

The company legally responsible for an import. This is the name you can sell to.

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**NVOCC**

Non-vessel operating common carrier, a forwarder that issues its own bills of lading without owning ships.

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**Blank sailing**

When a carrier cancels a scheduled departure, pulling capacity off a lane.

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# Where the data and the workflow live

Everything here describes one workflow. Read the shipment data, build a target list, spot the companies in motion, find the decision maker, and reach out with something relevant. The reason most teams never run it is that it normally takes three or four tools that do not talk to each other. A trade data subscription here, a contact finder there, an email tool somewhere else, and a spreadsheet holding it together.

## Ubico runs that workflow in one place.

It includes over 70 million global shipment records covering real import and export activity, with HS codes, carriers, lanes, and volumes, refreshed daily. From a company you find in that data, you can identify the decision maker, enrich a verified email or phone number through built-in providers, and launch multichannel outreach, without leaving the platform or touching a spreadsheet.

That is the difference between knowing trade data exists and actually using it. The teams that turn shipment records into conversations are the ones whose workflow is short enough to run every week.

SEE HOW IT WORKS

Request a demo

→ [ubico.io/request-demo](https://ubico.io/request-demo)