

IMPORTING AND EXPORTING

**SEVEN
QUESTIONS
TO ASK
WHEN
LOOKING
FOR A
CUSTOMS
PROVIDER**

Importing and Exporting

Seven questions to ask when looking for a customs provider

Helping you find the right customs brokerage services provider for your business.

For businesses that import or export goods across North American borders, using a customs broker can save a lot of time and grief when it comes to dealing with the many complicated regulations and requirements.

But not all customs providers are the same – so how can you distinguish one from the other? How do you know which one is going to provide the solutions and services that are most appropriate for your business?

1 Do you offer North American coverage?

Ideally, you want to work with a single provider that offers both Canadian and U.S. customs brokerage. Why? Using multiple providers can cost more money – and can increase the amount of time you need to spend managing all the different relationships, processes and compliance issues. Having one North American provider who can take care of everything for you is not only going to save you time, money and reduce your risk factor, you'll also have the opportunity to build a stronger relationship. And the more your broker knows about your business, the better they can provide you with strategic insights and guidance on improving the overall process, dealing with compliance issues, and even streamlining your supply chain.

2 How will you partner with me to ensure success for my business?

Obviously, developing a strong relationship with your customs provider is going to enhance the service that you receive. But it's the provider who's going to take a deep interest in your business and feel invested in your success that's going to make a true difference.

When you're seeking potential broker partners (and partner is the key word here), first get a sense of how well they understand your industry, and the unique needs of your business. Ask them to give you examples of how they've



gone out of their way to solve problems that are similar to ones you've faced. Determine whether or not this is a provider who's going to be proactive and accountable when it comes to solving issues. More importantly, get a feel for whether or not they consider themselves to be a partner in your business, or merely a vendor.

3 Who are my main contacts, and what is your typical response time?

It may be a business cliché, but it's true – time is money. And there's nothing more frustrating than dealing with multiple people who just don't get your business, leaving you to explain your situation, over and over again.

The right customs broker will provide you with dedicated contacts (as well as their back-up options) who are easy to reach, and respond to your questions, or issues, in a timely manner. For instance, if you're simply looking for an update on your customs clearance status, you should expect a response within a few hours. For more urgent matters, like shipment delays, the response should be immediate. Your broker should be flexible enough to solve problems on the spot as they occur.

4 What are your areas of expertise?

While it's ultimately your responsibility to understand how various regulations apply to your business, that doesn't mean you need to be an expert in customs regulations and

tariffs. But your broker should be. You need to trust that they're an expert in their field, so you can concentrate on what you do best.

Look for a customs broker that offers a high ratio of licensed or certified customs professionals. Ask about their additional services that can improve your processes, help with recordkeeping, or prepare you for customs audits. Find out if they're able to help you develop and implement compliance programs, or provide guidance about navigating complex international trade agreements. All of these can bring more value, and hopefully more profitability, to your business.

Now, while you shouldn't be expected to know your broker's business, you should expect that they understand yours, so they can provide you with the right information and services.

5 Do you offer locations at all major North American ports and borders?

It's not overly important that you find a customs provider that's located close to your business. However, it is vital that they have some kind of presence at the port or border where your shipments will arrive, since it can help lower fees and reduce response times. It can also allow your broker to develop strong relationships with customs officials, making it easier to get shipments moved forward in the queue, or deal with any problems, directly.

If you happen to be dealing with a broker in a different time zone, make sure there's someone available when you need them – either by offering extended business hours or operating 24/7.

6 How will you customize your service for my business?

Depending on what industry you're in, the type of goods you're importing and exporting, and the volume of your shipments, you're going to have some pretty specific needs when it comes to customs clearance processes. You should be confident that your customs provider is going to take those needs into consideration and demonstrate that they're knowledgeable enough to handle your unique requirements.

7 What technology do you have in place to help me save time and money?

As with any business today, flexible, robust technology and automation help increase efficiency, control costs, and reduce risks for importers. The same holds true for your

customs provider. Any broker—regardless of their size—must be completely automated with full connectivity to U.S. and Canada Customs. This is necessary to increase compliance, and reduce the chance of your shipments getting held up at the border.

When it comes to communication, you should be able to reach your broker easily via telephone, email, and/or fax. More technologically-advanced brokers will offer other communication options like Electronic Data Interchange (EDI), or File Transfer Protocol (FTP).

EDI allows you to transmit critical data between you and the broker (e.g., part numbers, purchase order details, commercial invoice data), and between your broker and Customs.

With FTP, your files are delivered instantly, and you've got greater flexibility with how you use your documents. Purchasing, accounting, audit teams can all access the documents they need, so you don't have to make copies and distribute around the company. If EDI and FTP are made available to you, make sure that your broker is flexible on file formats. If they're not willing to customize according to your needs, it could be a sign that they're not going to be flexible in other areas.

One last tip

Don't be afraid to ask for references or client testimonials. Sometimes it helps to get that extra bit of validation to let you know if you're making the right decision.

Contact Livingston

Have questions or need help with your shipments? Contact your account executive, write to us at: simplify@livingstonintl.com or give us a call at **1-800-837-1063**

