

Compliance through technology

Software providers help truckers meet new e-Manifest requirements

In this age of congestion and security consciousness, minutes count. Shippers and carriers pursue any avenue to gain an edge over their competitors. Crossing the border, once an annoying, albeit bearable exercise, today can be an hours-long test of endurance.

It doesn't have to be that way. Information technology not only helps, but with the Bureau of Customs and Border Protection determined to combat terrorism, it's essential.

Perhaps at no other time has technology been more important in the supply chain than today. Take, for example, Customs' Automated Commercial Environment, an important component of the agency's modernization effort in the wake of Sept. 11. In short, ACE provides the trade community with a more efficient Web-based interface with government agencies, lowering the cost of processing transactions on the government and trade sides.

For trucks rolling into the U.S., the use of Customs' electronic manifest, an electronic version of paper manifests, is now mandatory for all trucks entering the country through Washington state and Arizona, and certain ports of entry in North Dakota.

A second group of ports — in California, New Mexico and Texas — will be required to use the electronic filing system starting on April 19. Border crossings in Michigan, Minnesota, New York, Vermont and Alaska, as well as the remaining points in North Dakota, ultimately will join the program as well.

Described as "One Face at the Border," the e-Manifest program enables one data filing through the ACE secure Web portal by electronic data interchange or through a combination of portal and EDI linkages. Under the program, a trucker is required to transmit data via the ACE Truck Manifest System to Customs one hour before his vehicle arrives at the border.

Technology providers — here to help

Software companies have provided advanced interfaces for their clients with systems of Customs and its predecessor agencies. One leading provider of e-Manifest software is ASCI of Miami. Established in the



As Customs works to phase in the use of its electronic manifest requirement for truckers, software vendors are prepared to assist companies in complying with the new measures.

early 1980s as Associated System Consultants, ASCI offers complete software packages for customs brokers, importers, forwarders and other participants in transport supply chains.

After more than 25 years of doing business, ASCI is dedicated to meeting the evolving needs of its customers in the international trade community. ASCI has received certification from Customs as an e-Manifest provider.

Trandata, also based in South Florida, specializes in providing software solutions for drayage companies, specifically truckers handling movements to or from ports. These moves can be characterized by several hand-offs and interchanges, and require detailed work throughout the business process, from dispatching drivers to tracking per diems to managing accessorials.

Trandata's suite of interconnected products includes container tracking, a module for tracking truck chassis, and its Drayage Management System (DMS). Built around the terminals at South Florida's ports, the product suite brings efficiencies and necessary

automation to every part of the truckers' business processes. It also offers the connectivity to interface with other systems, including EDI systems at large steamship lines and with Global Positioning Satellite software. The software has the approval of the Florida Independent Trucking Association.

"Trandata grew up in the drayage industry. Our DMS software was designed specifically for drayage truckers — not adapted from LTL or FTL software, like most other packages out there," said Kaz Chary, the company's president and chief executive. Seventy percent of the truckers in the Port of Miami use Trandata's DMS, Chary said.

Working out the kinks

Customs is phasing ports into the e-Manifest program. With each announcement, Customs is including a 60-day period of "informed compliance," during which kinks are worked out. It also promises to be tough in enforcing the requirement; fines could run as high as \$10,000 for failure to file the electronic manifests. The tight time frame is not lost on vendors, who have assured their

customers that they are available to help.

"We know that the first two weeks after a trucking company purchases a system is critical. That's why we offer hands-on training and unbeatable support throughout that period until the whole team has mastered the system," said Chary, whose company offers bilingual support.

Services such as ASCI's and Trandata's can give carriers a competitive advantage by reducing the time it takes to clear the border. And the service doesn't end when the software is sold. "We focus on customer service, but not just to teach our customers how to use our programs. We want to get their continuous feedback on how to improve their applications to best suit their needs," ASCI President and Founder Roberto Mastrapa said.

Liz Farrat, sales director, ASCI of Miami, agrees. "Having the right tools is an essential first step toward efficiency," she said. "You only need to enter information for your equipment, crew and conveyance one time. After that, entering a manifest is a simple matter of point and click." ■

