

## Choosing a tanker agent

### **The choice of a port tanker agent is getting increasingly complex as demands on tanker agents increase. Lucy Budd reviews the options**

Tankers, more than any other sector of the maritime industries, are never far from the prospect of attracting unwanted publicity.

The relationship between shipping and the environment is an uneasy one. Crude oil can be a dangerous cargo under the wrong conditions.

The threat of pollution - and the draconian fines that can be levied for it throughout the world - is ever-present, even in the most carefully monitored operations.

So tanker terminals tend to be sited in remote locations, which are subject to high levels of security. In many ports, tankers are not allowed to navigate at night.

All this can lead to special demands on the port agent.

These demands have in turn been further complicated by the introduction of the ISPS code.

Compliance with the code is mandatory, and failure to fulfil all regulations can cause problems not just in one port, but also further down the line. European and US ports in particular may refuse entry to a ship.

"With tanker agency, the accent is on ecological, safety and security issues," says Radomir Popovic, head of the ship operations department at Jadroagent Bar, a shipping agent operating in Montenegro.

"Now, I feel that the ISPS code could be a limitation factor for local tanker activities." Helping owners to comply with the particular restrictions in any given port with the minimum of disruption to their schedule will become an even more vital part of the ship agent's role when the code comes into force in July.

### **Local knowledge**

Tankers attract special responsibilities under local laws, and particular attention from port state control inspectors.

Special care must be taken to ensure that documentation relating to the ships and their cargoes is in order.

Over the past few years, there has been a considerable increase in the amount of documentation required, affecting all kinds of tankers, not just those carrying potentially sensitive cargo.

But these skills are not always widely available, and depending on the port in question, sometimes even more unusual skills are called for.

In Mauritania, for example, the channels at the port of Nouakchott are not lighted, so that ships can only move in and out by day.

Ship agents not only have to making sure the ships who call at the port are aware of this, they are also under a much greater constraint in terms of the time available for ship turnaround.

This can put strain on some agents who do not specialise in tankers.

In some agencies, says a Mauritanian source, only one person is capable of dealing with this type of port call, often putting a severe strain on resources.

Sometimes, the problem is made even worse by the lack of competent English speakers. Language skills are a vital resource for agents today.

In addition to speaking English to a high enough level to deal with owners' representatives and ship's crews from around the world, agents must also have an understanding of the highly technical vocabulary needed to deal with loading demands.

They also need both a good oversight and deep understanding of the documentation that is needed.

### **Other demands**

Because tankers rely on quick turnaround times to ensure their viability in a highly competitive industry, it is vital to get crews to and from ships and terminals in good time, and to arrange for the timely supply of bunkers and stores.

Ultimately, agents are paid to be the eyes and ears of their principals. In tanker shipping, this entails particular responsibilities.

Agents have to keep their fingers on the pulse of local developments. They have to keep abreast of all current regulations, including environmental legislation, in an effort to ensure that their principals do not fall foul of the rules.

Even a simple mistake, such as an error in an oil record book, can lead to hefty fines and imprisonment of crew in some parts of the world. It is the agent's job to make sure that its principals are made aware of their responsibilities.

In shipping - and in tanker shipping particularly - time is money, and safety is everything. A good port agent can help a responsible shipowner to minimise the financial risks without compromising on safety. That is what a good agent does, and there will always be work for good agents.

### **Callitsis**

"Whilst the proportion of tanker work remains about constant, the amount of work has effectively increased as ship managers now expect a much more comprehensive service from their ship agents," says Andreas Callitsis, managing director of Callitsis Shipping Agency, which is headquartered in Piraeus and operates in ports throughout Greece.

"The challenges agents are facing as regards tanker attendance require extreme accuracy and organisation," says Mr Callitsis. "The only way to tackle these requirements is with a very high level of skill and professionalism."

The agency gets about a quarter of its work from dealing with tankers of various kinds.

"In addition to oil tankers, we also attend vessels involved in the transport of edible oils, wines, alcohols, chemicals and molasses," says Mr Callitsis.

The work involved in turning round any of these vessels could include cargo handling, bunkering, and managing all the information relating to cargo manifests, disclosure and security.

### **Choosing an agency**

Finding an agency that can fulfil all these requirements is not always easy. For this reason, many owners prefer to rely on a network of high quality independent agents such as that operated by Multiport, which represents over 3,000 different principals and more than 60,000 ships in over 1,250 ports throughout the world.

It is an international organisation which demands high standards of financial and operational integrity from its members.

Networks of this kind not only help owners select efficient and reliable agents, but allow the agents themselves refer owners to ship agents with equivalent experience and expertise at the other end of the voyage.

"The benefits we obtain from membership of the Multiport organisation are continually increasing due to the exchange of business connections and reciprocal recommendations," says Andreas Callitsis.

Jadroagent Bar's Popovic is also enthusiastic about the benefits of Multiport membership. "Being a member of a well-organised worldwide network enables you to get more and better information as rapidly as possible, which is a great benefit for the company," he says. And in this case, what is good for the agent is also good for the owner.

*Lucy Budd wrote this article on behalf of ship agency network Multiport - for further information see [www.multiport.org](http://www.multiport.org)*