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Marketing basics in logistics

Services marketing, marketing vs sales, B2B buying, STP, the 7Ps, customer value and NPS, seen through a freight forwarder's eyes

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Online interactive version: **https://ozgurkonakci.com/en/guide/logistics-marketing-basics/**

SHORT ANSWER

Logistics is a service: a forwarder does not sell a physical product but a promise that the cargo will arrive on time, undamaged and with the right documents. Marketing in logistics therefore means dealing with the fact that services are intangible, produced and consumed at the same time, variable and perishable. The core tools are choosing the right customers (segmentation, targeting and positioning), designing the service with the 7Ps and keeping customers over the long term.

Logistics is a service

A freight forwarder does not hand its customer anything they can hold. What it sells is a promise: the cargo will arrive within the agreed time, undamaged, with the right documents and at the cost that was discussed. That is where marketing in logistics gets difficult. The customer cannot test the promise until the job is done.

Marketing textbooks list four characteristics that set services apart from physical products. These concepts are part of the shared framework of marketing textbooks; the definitions below are summarised from the open-access OpenStax textbook.

Characteristic	What it means	What it looks like in logistics
Intangibility	A service cannot be seen, touched or tried before it is bought.	At the quotation stage the customer cannot "see" the shipment. Trust comes from references, a clearly explained process, documents and the tracking screen.
Inseparability	A service is produced and consumed at the same time.	The way an operations coordinator handles a phone call, or how quickly a wrong document is corrected, is the service itself. There is little room for the kind of quality check a factory runs before goods leave.
Variability	Quality depends on who delivers the service, when, where and how.	Within one company, service can differ from branch to branch, from one overseas agent to another, and between a quiet month and peak season. Written processes and standard operating procedures narrow the gap.
Perishability	A service cannot be stored to be sold later.	An empty container slot on a vessel that has sailed, or unsold cargo space on an aircraft that has taken off, is gone for good. Capacity measures such as blank sailings and frequently changing spot rates are linked to this pressure.

The "What it looks like in logistics" column is our own application, not part of the source definitions.

The practical upshot is that marketing in logistics is not just advertising and brochures. What the customer actually experiences, meaning how the team behaves and how the process runs, is marketing's strongest tool.

How marketing differs from sales

The American Marketing Association (AMA) defines marketing as "the activity, set of institutions, and processes for creating, communicating, delivering, and exchanging offerings that have value for customers, clients, partners, and society at large." Sales is part of that picture, not the whole of it.

	Marketing	Sales
The question	Which customer groups should we target, with which services, which pricing approach and which message?	How do we win this piece of business with this customer and keep it?
Focus	Market, segments, brand, service design	Individual customers, quotes, meetings
Time horizon	Medium to long term	Short to medium term
Example in logistics	Defining a reefer offering for food exporters, choosing which trade fairs to attend, preparing website content	Quoting an exporter, bidding in a tender, getting the first shipment moving

In their 2006 *Harvard Business Review* article, Kotler, Rackham and Krishnaswamy describe two sources of friction between the functions: competition over a shared budget, and cultural differences. Salespeople may see marketers as out of touch with customers; marketers may see salespeople as too focused on individual accounts. The article's central point is that company performance improves when the two work together.

Selling itself comes in more than one form. Sales training texts distinguish **transactional selling** from **consultative (relationship) selling**. Transactional selling is a one-off exchange that needs no relationship. In consultative selling, the salesperson works to understand the customer's needs and proposes solutions. Logistics has both: a spot freight quote is often transactional, while helping a regular exporter design its supply chain is consultative.

What makes B2B marketing different

Most logistics services are sold business to business (B2B). In B2B, the buying decision is rarely made by one person. Textbooks call the group involved the **buying centre** and describe the roles within it:

Role	What it does	A likely counterpart at an exporter
Initiator	Raises the need to buy	The export manager who decides to open a new market
User	Actually uses the service	The shipping coordinator who makes bookings and prepares documents every day
Influencer	Shapes the views of others	The sales team promising delivery dates to customers, the quality department
Decider	Has the final say	The logistics or supply chain manager, sometimes the general manager

Role	What it does	A likely counterpart at an exporter
Buyer	Handles the contract and paperwork	The purchasing department
Gatekeeper	Controls the flow of information and access	The purchasing specialist who manages the supplier list, an executive assistant

The "likely counterpart" column is our own example; roles are split differently in every company, and one person often plays several.

This has three practical consequences in logistics:

- **Each person looks at something different.** Purchasing looks at price, the shipping coordinator at fast and accurate information, finance at payment terms and invoice accuracy, the sales team at delivery dates. One message will not cover them all.
- **The buying situation matters.** Textbooks describe three: a first-time purchase (new task), a repeat purchase with changed terms (modified rebuy) and a repeat purchase from the same supplier on the same terms (straight rebuy). A small business choosing a forwarder for the first time asks a lot of questions and looks for reassurance. On routine shipments, the customer needs a strong reason to change an established supplier.
- **Demand is derived.** In textbook terms, derived demand is demand for one product that arises from demand for another. Freight demand derives from trade: if the customer's sales fall, even the best marketing will not increase the number of shipments.

B2B relationships run long and rest on trust. How one problem was handled can be remembered longer than ten trouble-free shipments.

Segmentation, targeting and positioning (STP)

STP describes three steps in marketing strategy: dividing the market into groups with similar characteristics (segmentation), choosing which groups to focus on (targeting) and deciding what place to occupy in the minds of the chosen group (positioning).

Segmentation

The bases textbooks suggest for B2B include **firmographic** segmentation (industry, location, size), **needs-based**, **behavioural** and **value-based** segmentation (the revenue a customer brings against the cost of serving it). For a logistics company, these might look like this:

Basis	Example groups	A typical leading need (example)
Industry (vertical)	Textiles and apparel	Seasonal calendars, speed, switching modes when needed
	Automotive suppliers	Regular, punctual flows and planning that keeps production lines running
	Food and fresh produce	Reefer equipment, cold chain, temperature records

Basis	Example groups	A typical leading need (example)
	Energy and infrastructure projects	Project cargo, out-of-gauge loads, route surveys
Trade lane	Türkiye–Germany by road, Far East–Türkiye ocean imports	Reliable capacity and competitive rates on that lane
Company size	A small business making its first export	Guidance, help with documents, groupage and LCL solutions
	A large exporter	Guaranteed capacity, reporting, fitting into tender processes
Service need	Freight only; door to door including customs	A single point of contact, or the lowest unit price

The needs in the table are examples; even two companies in the same industry can expect different things.

Textbooks list five criteria for a workable segment: it should be **measurable** (its size and buying power can be estimated), **substantial** (large or profitable enough), **accessible** (the company can reach and serve it), **differentiable** (it responds differently from other groups) and **actionable** (the company can build an effective programme for it).

Targeting

Once segments are defined, the company decides where to focus. The main options are:

- **Undifferentiated marketing:** one message for everyone. "We move any cargo, anywhere" comes close, and it is rarely memorable.
- **Differentiated marketing:** separate programmes for more than one segment, for example a distinct service description and separate content for automotive and food customers.
- **Concentrated marketing:** putting all resources into a single segment. Specialists that focus only on project cargo or only on the cold chain take this route.
- **Micromarketing:** tailoring to a very narrow group, even to individual customers.

Positioning

Positioning is the effort to shape how target customers think and feel about the company. A company either leans on the qualities that set it apart (differentiation) or competes directly on the same attributes as its rivals. A short **positioning statement** makes the choice explicit. A simple template:

> For [target customer] who need [core need], [company type] provides [service], because [concrete proof].

"Best price, best service" is not positioning; every competitor can say the same. Positioning should rest on a chosen customer, on work the company is genuinely good at and on proof it can show.

The marketing mix: from 4Ps to 7Ps

The marketing mix is the set of tools a company combines to reach its target market. Its best-known form is the 4Ps: product, price, place and promotion. The framework spread through E. Jerome McCarthy's 1960 book *Basic Marketing*; Neil Borden's earlier concept of the "marketing mix" was a longer list of tools.

For services, Booms and Bitner added three more elements in 1981: participants (now usually called **people**), **process** and **physical evidence**. This gave the **7Ps** widely used in services marketing.

Element	What it covers in logistics
Product / service	Transport modes and combinations, transit time, door-to-door scope, customs, insurance, warehousing, reporting
Price	Freight and surcharges, all-in versus itemised quotes, quote validity, payment terms
Place / access	The office and agent network, the channels customers use to reach the company (phone, email, online quotes and bookings), out-of-hours availability
Promotion	Sales visits, the website, LinkedIn, trade fairs, newsletters, references
People	Sales, operations, customer service and customs teams, their knowledge and their attitude
Process	Quote turnaround, booking confirmation, status updates, handling exceptions such as delays and damage, invoice accuracy
Physical evidence	The tracking screen, the quality of bills of lading and other documents, regular reports, the condition of equipment, the office, the website

The mapping in the table is our own.

In logistics the last three Ps often decide the outcome. When there is little to choose between prices, customers tend to decide on questions like these: who answers when I ask, and how fast? When something goes wrong, who tells me first? Do documents and invoices arrive right the first time? These are what turn the intangible promise into something the customer can see.

Customer value and relationships

Customer value and the value proposition

In textbook terms, **customer value** compares the benefits a customer perceives with the costs they bear to get them. Cost is not only the freight rate: time lost to late information, storage charges caused by a wrong document and a missed delivery date are costs too. The **value proposition** is the promise of value a company delivers, communicates and has accepted by the customer.

Customer lifetime value (CLV)

As defined in the 2006 study by Gupta and colleagues, customer lifetime value (CLV) is the net present value of the profits a company earns from a customer over the course of the relationship. Unlike a standard cash flow

calculation, it is worked out per customer or segment and explicitly allows for the chance that the customer moves to a competitor.

A simple example (the figures are hypothetical): a small exporter ships 4 containers a month and the forwarder makes a gross profit of USD 100 per container. If the relationship lasts three years, total gross profit is 4 × 12 × 100 × 3 = USD 14,400. This is a rough figure with no discounting and no allowance for the customer leaving. Even so, it paints a different picture from decisions based on USD 100 profit on a single shipment.

The same study also sets out the limits of CLV: calculations based on an expected customer lifetime can overstate value; where margins and retention change quickly, CLV needs re-estimating more often; and allocating costs to individual customers is difficult.

Why retention matters, and where it is overstated

Long relationships are a major source of value in B2B logistics: processes settle in, errors fall and both sides learn each other's language. But widely repeated ratios such as "winning a new customer costs five times as much as keeping one" cannot be traced to a sound primary study, so this guide does not use them. An Ipsos review of loyalty myths makes an important point: keeping a customer only pays off if that customer is profitable. Seeing which customers are worth keeping takes something like a CLV view.

Measuring customer experience: NPS and its limits

Net Promoter Score (NPS) is a measure closely associated with Bain & Company and Fred Reichheld. As Bain describes it:

1. Customers are asked how likely they are to recommend you to a friend or colleague, on a scale of 0 to 10.
2. Those who answer 9 or 10 are **promoters**, 7 or 8 **passives** and 0 to 6 **detractors**.
3. NPS = percentage of promoters – percentage of detractors.

Because it is the difference between two percentages, the score runs from –100 to +100. For example, if 20 of 50 respondents are promoters (40%) and 10 are detractors (20%), NPS = 40 – 20 = 20. Net Promoter and NPS are registered trademarks of Bain & Company, NICE Systems and Fred Reichheld.

It is worth knowing the limits of NPS:

- **Academic criticism:** a study by Keiningham, Cooil, Andreassen and Aksoy, published in the *Journal of Marketing* in 2007 and based on longitudinal data from 21 Norwegian companies, could not confirm the claim that NPS is clearly better than other customer measures at predicting growth.
- **It does not tell you why:** when the score drops, it does not say whether the cause is price, an operational error or one bad experience. An open "why?" question is needed.
- **In B2B, who you ask matters:** within the buying centre, the shipping coordinator and the purchasing manager have different experiences. Record which role each answer comes from.
- **Samples are small:** for a company with few customers, a handful of answers can move the score noticeably. Bain itself stresses that the measure has to rest on sound sampling and survey methods.

The second and third points, and the first sentence of the fourth, are our own practical assessment. Rather than turning NPS into a stand-alone target, it is more useful to read it alongside operational indicators such as on-time delivery, quote and booking confirmation times and invoice accuracy. The five dimensions textbooks use for service quality also make a good checklist: **reliability** (doing what was promised, accurately and on time), **assurance**, **tangibles**, **empathy** and **responsiveness**.

Brand and digital visibility in logistics

For a company selling an intangible service, the brand is the customer's first answer to the question "can I trust these people?" The principles below are general; they include no industry-specific success figures or platform statistics.

- **The website is physical evidence.** It should be clear which services are offered, on which lanes and through what structure (own office or agent network). Appearing to have an office in a country where you have none becomes a trust problem the moment the first shipment moves. Contact details, a way to request a quote and valid certifications should be easy to find.
- **LinkedIn is more than the company page.** In B2B, decision-makers often look up the salesperson and the operations manager as well. Up-to-date, consistent employee profiles can matter as much as company posts.
- **Trade fairs are where the target segment is.** The right fair may be your target customers' industry fair rather than a logistics one: a food fair for a forwarder that wants to reach food exporters, for example. Booking meetings in advance and following up quickly and personally afterwards matter as much as the stand itself.
- **Content marketing informs.** Guides, market notes and FAQs that answer exporters' real questions build trust. Content that is accurate, sourced and current counts for more than content in volume.
- **Exaggeration erodes trust.** Instead of unverifiable claims such as "world leader" or "fastest anywhere", describing concrete scope, process and references is more convincing.
- **Consistency carries the brand.** Logo, colours, language and message should be the same on the website, in quotes, in email signatures and on the fair stand.

Where to go next in the guide

- Pricing: **Pricing and decision models**, **Freight quotations and surcharges**, **FCL, LCL and freight calculation**
- Capacity and freight rate swings: **Shipping markets and freight cycles**
- The customer's world: **Supply chain basics**, **The parties in trade and logistics**
- Guiding a first-time exporter: **Your first export or import: a step-by-step roadmap**
- Industry examples: **Reefer containers and the cold chain**, **Project cargo and out-of-gauge loads**
- Handling problems and customer experience: **Cargo damage and the claims process**
- Industry associations and networks: **Logistics and trade organisations**
- Sales and marketing roles: **Careers in logistics: roles and paths**

Test yourself

1. A vessel leaves port with unsold container slots on board. Which characteristic of services does this illustrate? *(Answer: Perishability. Unsold capacity cannot be stored and sold later.)*
2. At an exporter, purchasing runs the forwarder selection, but the shipping coordinator who makes bookings every day is also consulted. What is the coordinator's role in the buying centre? *(Answer: User. If their view shapes the decision, they are also an influencer.)*
3. Under the 7Ps, which element covers the tracking screen, documents and website? *(Answer: Physical evidence.)*
4. Of 100 customers, 45 score 9–10, 35 score 7–8 and 20 score 0–6. What is the NPS? *(Answer: 45 − 20 = 25.)*

Further reading

For a fuller framework of the concepts in this topic, see *Principles of Marketing* by Philip Kotler, Gary Armstrong and Sridhar Balasubramanian (Pearson, 19th edition). The definitions in this article are drawn not from that book but from the open-access sources linked in the references.

Frequently asked questions

Are marketing and sales the same thing in logistics?

No. Sales focuses on winning and keeping a specific piece of business with a specific customer. Marketing decides which customer groups to go after, with which services, which pricing approach and which message, and opens the door for sales. When the two work in isolation, performance suffers; in their 2006 HBR article, Kotler, Rackham and Krishnaswamy trace the tension to budget conflict and cultural differences.

What are the 7Ps and what do they mean in logistics?

The 7Ps add people, process and physical evidence to the classic 4Ps of product, price, place and promotion. The three extra elements come from Booms and Bitner's 1981 work on service firms. In logistics, people are the sales, operations and customer service teams; process is the flow of quotes, bookings, updates and invoicing; physical evidence is the tracking screen, documents, reports, equipment and website.

How is NPS calculated?

Customers are asked how likely they are to recommend you to a friend or colleague on a scale of 0 to 10. Those who answer 9 or 10 are promoters, 7 or 8 passives and 0 to 6 detractors. NPS is the percentage of promoters minus the percentage of detractors.

Is NPS enough on its own?

It is not recommended as a stand-alone measure. A 2007 study by Keiningham and colleagues in the Journal of Marketing could not confirm the claim that NPS is clearly superior to other measures in predicting growth. In B2B, several people shape the buying decision, so the answer also depends on who you ask. NPS is more useful when read alongside an open 'why?' question and operational indicators such as on-time delivery and invoice accuracy.

Why should a small logistics company choose a segment?

Because trying to offer everything to everyone spreads limited resources thin and blurs the message. A company that focuses on a particular industry, trade lane or customer size learns that group's needs better, builds its processes around them and can describe itself more clearly. The chosen segment should be measurable, reachable and large enough to be worth serving.

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