

How to Run a Value-Driven RFP



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Introduction

In today's complex global trade environment, supply chain resilience has never been more critical to business success.

The current US administration's aggressive tariff policies and rapidly shifting trade regulations have introduced unprecedented volatility into international commerce, forcing companies to rapidly reassess sourcing strategies and logistics networks. For example, the sudden implementation of reciprocal tariffs in early 2025 left many retailers scrambling to reroute shipments and find alternative suppliers, with some experiencing significant delays and cost overruns due to inadequate freight forwarding partnerships.

Companies now face mounting pressures from geopolitical uncertainties, capacity fluctuations and regional congestion, and evolving customer expectations—making the selection of the right freight forwarding partner a strategic imperative rather than a simple procurement exercise.

If you are running a Request for Proposal (RFP) process to find the freight forwarder that is right for you, it's essential to spend time evaluating your vendors holistically to gain a comprehensive understanding of the potential value they can add to both your business and operational processes.

While RFPs are powerful tools that allow you to quantify total cost, evaluate trade-offs between price and service quality, and identify the best freight forwarder for your company's specific needs, designing an effective RFP is more challenging than it appears.

Traditional RFP approaches often encourage numerous forwarders to compete primarily on price, leading to a race to the bottom where low rates come at the expense of poor service quality, limited visibility, and weak partnership support.

To choose a freight forwarder that will truly be the best partner to your business—one that drives efficiency and total cost reduction, mitigates risk, and supports your growth objectives—you need to run a value-driven RFP.



Supply Chain Foundations for a Value-Driven RFP

Building a value-driven RFP requires deep visibility into your supply chain so you can identify risk, cost drivers, and opportunities for improvement before engaging partners.

1. **Supplier Landscape Analysis:** Analyze your sourcing footprint. Map out where your suppliers are located and which countries you're sourcing from, and then evaluate the potential risks associated with each region. Consider geopolitical tensions, labor disputes, natural disaster exposure, and infrastructure stability in these areas, and work with your team to create robust contingency plans that identify alternative suppliers or routing options should disruptions occur.
2. **Tariff and Trade Landscape:** Understand the tariffs and trade policy environment. Stay informed about existing tariff schedules, potential policy changes, and trade agreement negotiations that could impact your landed costs and competitiveness. Your freight forwarder should demonstrate expertise in navigating these complexities and offer proactive guidance on tariff mitigation strategies.
3. **Order to Cash Cycle:** Understanding your end-to-end order-to-cash cycle helps you see how value is created and where risk, cost, or delays may occur. It informs your RFP and supply chain requirements so they reflect how your supply chain actually operates, enabling partners to propose solutions that deliver real, measurable value.

This is a great opportunity to collaborate across your organization—including finance, product, sales, and marketing.

By connecting departmental insights with supply chain vulnerabilities, you can turn hidden risks into opportunities for growth.

Freight forwarding has historically been an antiquated industry slow to modernize, so inquire deeply into what software capabilities each provider offers—whether it's real-time shipment tracking, automated documentation, predictive analytics, or seamless integration with your existing systems—and what unique technological capabilities differentiate them from their competitors and would be most beneficial for your business needs.



Understanding the True Cost of Your Supply Chain: A Customs Perspective

The financial impact of customs and compliance on your bottom line has reached unprecedented levels, with rising tariffs and an increasingly complex duty landscape costing businesses.

Many companies lack full visibility into their customs data, leading them to overpay on duties, miss valuable refund opportunities, and fail to optimize their import strategies.

What you should do?

Leverage Flexport's ACE Analysis to freely uncover cost savings opportunities.

1. **Look Back:** Conduct a comprehensive ACE (Automated Commercial Environment) analysis to review your historical import data and uncover missed opportunities for duty savings, such as underutilized free trade agreements, incorrect tariff classifications, or eligible preference programs you haven't leveraged.
2. **Look Forward:** Model your supply chain for 2026 using estimated volumes to understand potential tariff costs. Evaluate scenarios such as country-of-origin shifts, product reclassification opportunities, or foreign trade zone usage before making costly commitments. This forward-looking analysis helps you make informed, value-driven decisions and optimize your global supply chain strategy.
3. **Recoup:** Finally, perform a thorough Duty Drawback comparison to capture hidden refunds on duties paid for goods that were subsequently exported, destroyed, or used in manufacturing—a program that remains dramatically underutilized despite offering legitimate opportunities to recover 99% of certain duties, taxes, and fees.



Instantly calculate duties, spot special rates, and stay ahead of changing trade policies with Flexports Tariff Simulator. Access the free tool [here](#).

When evaluating freight forwarders in your RFP, prioritize partners who provide sophisticated customs advisory services and technology platforms that make complex trade and tariff analyses accessible and actionable. This ensures you can make informed decisions, optimize your global supply chain, and maintain ongoing compliance and value delivery.

Ask Yourself:

- Are your classifications accurate and optimized to minimize duty payments?
- Do you know exactly what you saved last year, last quarter, or last month?
- Are missed opportunities—like First Sale, MPF consolidation, Free Trade Programs, duty drawback, or tariff engineering—slipping through the cracks?
- Do you need help spotting new opportunities?



Setting Up Your RFP Package

Setting up a successful, value-driven RFP requires strategic planning and disciplined execution well before you send out your first invitation to bid.

Be selective and intentional about who you invite to the bid. Quality matters far more than quantity when it comes to potential partners.

When doing this, remember that not everything is in the numbers, so leave room in your scorecard for topics such as technology, team support, market intelligence, communication, reporting, etc.

1. **Internal Bid Evaluation Scorecard:** Start by developing a supplier scorecard that evaluates candidates against your minimum requirements, then define your award strategy upfront by determining whether you'll select a single provider or split volume among multiple forwarders, ensuring this approach is aligned internally with key stakeholders before launching your bid. Deselect suppliers that don't meet your minimum requirements early in the process, as this allows for an objective evaluation focused on the topics most critical not just for your logistics team but across your entire business and among your most important stakeholders.
2. **Forwarder Value:** Define your objectives and outcomes with clarity and specificity—communicate to selected suppliers exactly what you want to improve in your business, including the specific problems uncovered in your Order to Cash, you need them to solve, whether that's reducing transit times, improving delivery scheduling visibility, reducing emails per shipment, or providing time savings to your team.
3. **Forecast:** Make a good forecast, recognizing that while forecasting is challenging, it's absolutely essential to ensure you secure the right rates and service quality throughout your contract validity period. You need granular information down to the trade lane and corridor level, and you must define how volume shifts throughout the year to ensure you're protected during seasonality that coincides with peak periods; consider whether your contracting strategy should include splitting forecasted volume between fixed and floating pricing, which in certain market contexts or with heavy seasonal volume can provide significant advantages.

4. **RFP Communication & Proposals:** Make it easy for providers to get clarification during the bid process by establishing clear channels for questions and, critically, sharing all questions and answers with all participating providers—you don't want anyone making incorrect assumptions about your business during the bid, as this inevitably leads to unpleasant surprises later; clarifying to all parties ensures everyone works from the same baseline understanding. Also, allow your participating providers to present their RFP package and strategy to your broader team. This gives context beyond the numbers and spreadsheet inputs, which often tell only half the story, and allows you to understand their approach, assumptions, and value creation strategies.
5. **Cost is Only Half the Story:** Consider your total cost rather than just the price, approaching your evaluation with specificity and granularity; a \$100/TEU or \$0.10/kg reduction in the base rate might actually be far more costly to your business than a more reliable offer that allows you to reduce safety stock levels or avoid expensive stock-outs. Ensure you understand each offer in detail, including the service quality commitments and the operational backing behind those promises; while it's reasonable to specify preferred carriers, remain mindful about keeping options open since carriers can change networks and priorities during the contract year.
6. **Rate Evaluation:** Provide a comprehensive rate template that lays out all possible additional fees which allows you to compare providers across all charges, helps your procurement team drive better negotiations, and reduces the risk of those additional charges that tend to be prohibitively expensive from getting hidden. Additionally, ask about pricing and potential surcharges under various future market scenarios, requesting that forwarders provide recommendations and contingencies for upcoming events such as geopolitical developments, regulatory changes, or capacity constraints that could impact your supply chain.



Mode-Specific Considerations:

When designing your RFP, it's essential to account for the unique dynamics and risks associated with your primary transportation modes. The operating environment, capacity constraints, and volatility drivers differ significantly between ocean and air freight, requiring tailored strategies to build resilience into your supply chain. Take a look at what we anticipate for the ocean and air modes in 2026.

Ocean Freight Outlook for 2026:

2026 is expected to be a year of continued volatility. You should anticipate carriers to be under increasing financial pressure as supply outweighs demand, which will likely result in aggressive capacity management, including blank sailings, network changes, and cancellation of services. Because of this dynamic, we recommend not concentrating your volume with a single carrier or even within one carrier Alliance, as carriers within the same Alliance share networks and can leave your supply chain vulnerable.

While the trade war between China and the U.S. is currently paused, trade tensions are expected to continue throughout 2026, including escalating friction likely with China and Europe. We have already witnessed significant diversification of sourcing from China to

Southeast Asia, and we expect trade patterns to remain in flux in the near future. This shift will likely increase operational challenges, such as port congestion in fast-growing markets with underdeveloped infrastructure that struggles to handle surging volumes.

The Suez Canal situation remains a wildcard for 2026 planning. Suez diversions have become the norm over the past years, but some carriers are slowly beginning to test the route again as the Houthis have reportedly pulled back from the area. When Suez is deemed safe by carriers and the first major carrier commits to the route, expect a rapid cascade as others rush to follow. However, this transition will create chaos at ports and inland points, especially in Europe and the North America East Coast. Many vessels will arrive simultaneously, warehouses will be overwhelmed with more goods than planned, trucks will face both waiting times and shortages, and ripple effects could persist for months until things get back on track. If your business is impacted by these trade lanes, you need to plan for contingencies now: if you rely on U.S. East Coast ports, develop West Coast alternatives; if you use North Europe gateways, explore South Europe gateways. You might not need these backup plans, but you will regret not having them if the transition occurs mid-season.



Air Freight Outlook for 2026:

The air freight market in 2026 will be shaped by evolving trade lane dynamics, continued e-commerce growth, and persistent capacity constraints that require strategic planning during your RFP process.

Trade Lane Trends vary significantly by corridor and will impact both your rates and service reliability. On the critical Asia to U.S. route, expect a slower Q1 following the typical post-holiday lull, with Q2–Q3 rates remaining relatively stable without major spikes or troughs, before a strong Q4 peak driven by continued explosive growth in e-commerce and AI-related demand for expedited technology shipments. The Asia to Europe lane is projected to see slightly higher rates overall, with H1 2026 expected to be particularly firm, supported by sustained e-commerce expansion. Conversely, North America to Europe/Asia markets are already unconstrained with limited changes expected, though rates to Southeast Asia may ease somewhat as additional capacity is introduced to support the region's growing manufacturing base. Similarly, Europe to North America/Asia routes remain unconstrained with minimal rate or capacity changes anticipated. Watch emerging markets closely, as demand and rates are rising in these corridors, driven by increased economic activity and manufacturing expansion as supply chains diversify away from traditional hubs.

Macro and Market Dynamics continue to create complexity that your freight forwarding partner will need to help you navigate expertly. Tariff uncertainty will continue creating volatile, seesaw-pattern U.S. import demand that makes forecasting challenging, while supply chain shifts from China to Southeast Asia accelerate—though these new markets notably lack China's mature infrastructure and capacity depth, potentially leading to service inconsistencies and operational challenges.

E-Commerce and Technology trends are fundamentally reshaping air freight demand patterns globally. E-commerce remains a powerful growth driver, expanding 15–20% annually despite tighter regulations and higher costs across multiple markets. The intra-Asia and Asia-to-Europe e-commerce segments are benefiting significantly from the U.S. De Minimis ban, which has redirected substantial volumes. Notably, U.S. e-commerce has already recovered to 90%+ of pre-De Minimis levels, demonstrating the channel's resilience. The EU e-commerce regulation planned for November 2026 is not expected to significantly alter overall market dynamics. Additionally, the AI boom continues fueling expedited shipments of data center components and related hardware, creating pockets of premium demand that can tighten capacity during critical periods. Keeping track of these two industries in particular is imperative to understanding how capacity demands could impact your supply chain.

Capacity Outlook remains constrained despite growth. Fleet capacity is growing approximately 5% year-over-year and nearing 2019 levels, yet still lags behind surging demand. Most new capacity is being deployed on Asia-to-Europe routes to cater to booming e-commerce needs, while Transpacific routes see limited growth. Furthermore, the grounding of the MD-11 freighter fleet (used mostly for domestic operations) could be sufficient to make overall capacity tight throughout 2026, potentially driving rates higher during peak periods. When evaluating air freight proposals in your RFP, ensure your partners have secured adequate capacity allocations with multiple carriers and can provide contingency options when space becomes constrained.



Key Takeaway for Supply Chain Managers for 2026

As you embark on your 2026 RFP process, remember that selecting the right freight forwarding partner is no longer simply a procurement decision, it's a strategic imperative that will determine your ability to navigate an increasingly complex and volatile global trade environment. The confluence of aggressive tariff policies, shifting trade patterns, volatile capacity, and rapid technological change demands a fundamentally different approach to vendor selection, one that prioritizes total value, resilience, and partnership over short-term savings on mainfreight price.

The market dynamics you'll face throughout 2026 require sophisticated planning and flexible strategies.

On the customs and compliance front, recognize that while the mechanics of managing an import entry haven't fundamentally changed—data and document collection remain the same—the trade war has fundamentally transformed international trade requirements. Create stringent documentation workflows and requirements to gather as much data as possible from suppliers and partners, embedding compliance into your procurement operations from the very beginning.

Ultimately, a value-driven RFP positions you to select a freight forwarding partner who will be more than a transactional service provider, they will be a strategic advisor equipped with the technology, expertise, and global network to help you navigate disruption, optimize costs, maintain compliance, and build the resilient supply chain your business needs to thrive in 2026 and beyond. The investment you make in designing and executing a thoughtful, comprehensive RFP process will pay dividends throughout your contract period and establish a foundation for long-term competitive advantage in an uncertain world.



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