



BLUSPARK

2026 Ocean Procurement Cheat Sheet

How to Use Allocation
Strategy, Carrier
Performance &
Operational Market Data
to Win in a Soft Market

Matthew McMahon - Director of Consulting



In a turbulent shipping landscape marked by oversupply and subdued demand, this cheat sheet equips Beneficial Cargo Owners with vital strategies for navigating procurement challenges. This comprehensive guide emphasizes the importance of a balanced approach, integrating fixed contracts, NVOCCs, and shipper associations to enhance adaptability and negotiating power. With actionable insights and data-driven strategies, shippers can confidently prepare for the complexities of the evolving market as they approach 2026.



This cheat sheet is designed to guide Beneficial Cargo Owners (BCOs) in leveraging the following elements: allocation strategy, carrier performance and charter dynamics, and operational plus market data. By applying these components effectively, BCOs can formulate a robust ocean procurement plan for 2026 that excels in both cost efficiency and operational resilience. The focus is not merely on minimizing expenses but on establishing a resilient framework that can adapt to market fluctuations and ensure smooth operations.

1. Market Features of 2026

The Bluspark 2026 Ocean Procurement Guide revolves around a straightforward yet powerful concept. In a soft market, the manner in which you allocate your shipping volume and the partners you choose to reward becomes far more critical than merely extracting an additional USD 50 per FEU from a spreadsheet. This shift emphasizes the importance of strategic relationships and effective planning rather than solely focusing on cost-cutting measures. As we look toward 2026, shippers will encounter the most buyer-friendly environment they have experienced in years, but this landscape is also fraught with complexities. Factors such as structural oversupply, subdued demand, a delayed Chinese New Year, elevated charter rates, European Union carbon costs, and evolving trade patterns all converge to create a market that, while generally trending downward, remains unpredictable.

This combination of structural oversupply and lackluster demand is primarily responsible for the downward pressure on average freight rates. While carriers can create short-lived periods of market tightness through blank sailings and network adjustments, the overarching trend remains one of decline. Although fuel prices do influence operational costs, they are not the main factor driving rates downward. Instead, the fundamental relationship between capacity and demand is what truly dictates rate levels.



1.1 Structural Oversupply + Soft Demand (The Real Story)

Three fundamental drivers characterize the market landscape of 2026. First, there is an oversupply of ships, coupled with insufficient cargo to fill them. The cellular capacity has soared to unprecedented heights, and the orderbook continues to expand with additional tonnage. Simultaneously, demand has softened significantly; the post-COVID rebound appears to be a thing of the past, with growth now stagnating in the low single digits, and some long-haul routes are already reporting negative year-on-year performance. Consequently, ship utilization rates are declining, with several key shipping corridors falling below the “comfort zone,” a situation that persists even as operators remain profitable with lower load factors.

1.2 Late Chinese New Year (Two Different Q1 Phases)

In 2026, the Chinese New Year (CNY) falls in mid-February, significantly shaping the first quarter by dividing it into two distinct market phases. The first phase extends from January to mid-February, characterized as an extended pre-CNY “super-peak.” During this time, factories tend to remain busier than usual, leading exporters to funnel increased cargo volumes into late-January and early-February sailings. In response, carriers may resort to General Rate Increases (GRIs), blank sailings, and stringent allocation measures to uphold their rate levels.



The second phase, spanning from late February to March, represents a post-CNY reset and a critical period for rate discovery. It is during this time that the true demand landscape becomes evident as the effects of the holiday lull dissipate. Carriers will reassess their capacity deployment on key shipping routes, and spot and long-term rates will begin to establish a “floor” that is likely to influence the rest of the year 2026. For effective procurement strategies, it is essential to treat Q1 as two separate environments rather than a single entity. This approach allows shippers to avoid prematurely locking in their entire procurement plans for 2026-27 before fully understanding how both market phases will unfold.

Although the trajectory of rates in 2026 is expected to be downward, it will not be linear; fluctuations will mark it. Shippers should anticipate artificial tightness and short-term spikes driven by strategic network decisions rather than demand alone.

Therefore, BCOS must construct their negotiation narratives to reflect both sides of the market. This

entails emphasizing the oversupply and soft demand, which provides leverage, while also acknowledging the elevated charter costs that compel carriers to defend their revenue streams.



In 2026, shippers must approach fixed contracts with a strategic mindset. It is advisable to refrain from locking in all commitments too early; the real market floor will likely only become apparent after the Chinese New Year and the early post-holiday sailings. During contract negotiations, it is essential to prioritize service and performance metrics alongside pricing. Key elements to consider include roll protection, schedule reliability, and escalation paths for unforeseen circumstances. Furthermore, shippers should advocate for transparent Bunker Adjustment Factor (BAF) structures that accurately reflect softer bunker markets without introducing unnecessary complexity. Building in flexibility for routing changes, such as alternative routes like Suez versus Cape, is also vital to account for potential port congestion.

1.3 The Charter Paradox: High Charter Costs in a Soft Freight Market

One of the most striking paradoxes as we enter 2026 is the disparity between freight indices and charter rates. Freight indices for the primary East-West trade routes have decreased substantially, reflecting solid double-digit drops compared to previous years. However, in stark contrast, container ship charter rates and secondhand prices remain unusually high in several size segments, defying expectations in a soft freight market. This situation poses a unique challenge for shippers as they navigate procurement complexities.

The implications of this paradox are significant. The ratio of charter costs to freight earnings has reached record levels, reflecting high daily time-charter rates and a remarkably low idle fleet. Major operators continue



to secure vessels on multi-year charters at these elevated rates, constraining the availability of prompt tonnage, even in an oversupplied market. For Beneficial Cargo Owners, understanding this dynamic is crucial, as charter commitments profoundly impact carrier behavior. Even when spot freight rates decline, the high obligations associated with charters compel carriers to implement GRIs, execute blank sailings, and exercise strict capacity management.

2. The 3-Legged Stool: A Procurement Strategy That Doesn't Fall Over

Bluspark's 2026 methodology emphasizes the importance of a balanced approach to procurement. Rather than relying on a single strategy, shippers should construct a three-legged stool to support their procurement efforts, incorporating fixed



contracts, Non-Vessel Operating Common Carriers (NVOCCs), and shipper associations. This diversified portfolio is designed to balance cost efficiency, reliability, and flexibility, ensuring shippers can adapt to the challenges posed by a fluctuating market.

2.1 Leg 1 – Fixed Carrier Contracts

Fixed carrier contracts serve as a foundational element for securing mission-critical shipping lanes and key stock-keeping units (SKUs). These contracts not only provide budget predictability but also establish Minimum Quantity Commitments (MQCs), which are crucial for long-term planning. Additionally, they foster collaboration between shippers and carriers on schedules, port selections, and service design, ensuring both parties are aligned on objectives and operational capabilities.

2.2 Leg 2 – NVOCC Programs

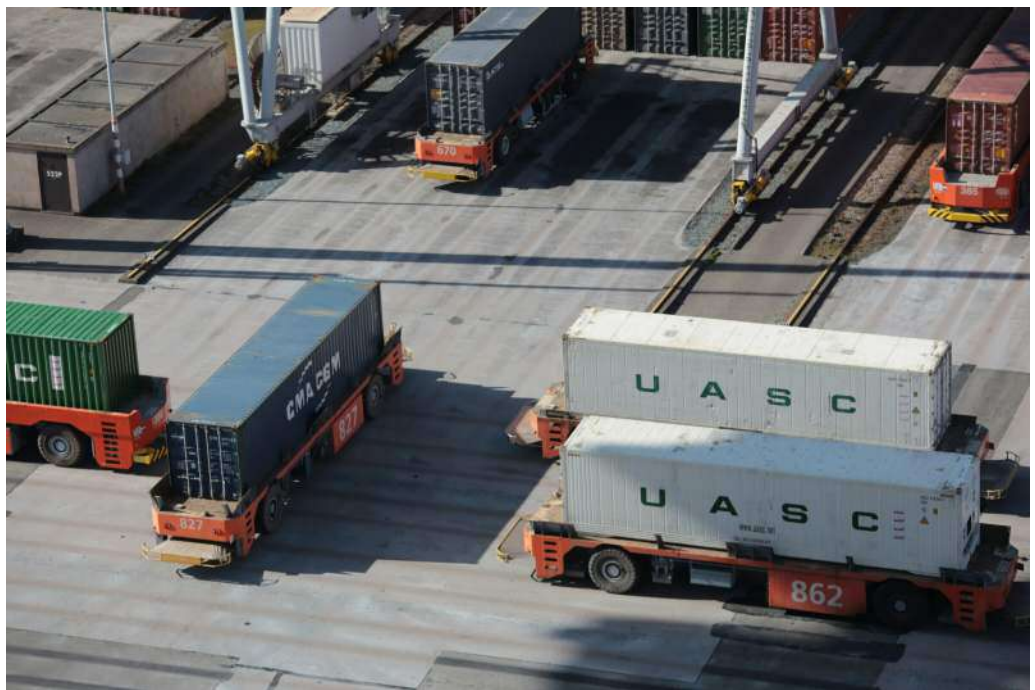
Shippers should view Non-Vessel Operating Common Carriers (NVOCCs) as strategic assets rather than merely backup options for spot-market needs. NVOCCs can play a pivotal role in facilitating access to emerging lanes and new sourcing regions where a shipper's own volume may still be limited. Moreover, they provide quick alternatives when a carrier's schedule or network changes, ensuring that shippers can maintain operational continuity. Additionally, NVOCCs offer bundled solutions that integrate ocean shipping, inland transport, customs services, and visibility, streamlining the logistical process.

In 2026, shippers must predefine their preferred use of NVOCCs as a primary choice rather than relegating them to a last-resort option. Leveraging the multi-carrier reach of NVOCCs can introduce competition in

concentrated trades,
driving better pricing and
service outcomes.

Furthermore, NVO
programs can provide
tactical coverage during
periods of General Rate
Increases (GRIs), blank
sailings, or port congestion,

allowing shippers to avoid renegotiating all their carrier contracts while still maintaining service levels.



2.3 Leg 3 – Shipper Associations / Buying Groups

Shipper associations and buying groups represent the third leg of the procurement stool. These entities aggregate their members' shipping volumes, enabling them to access more favorable pricing and terms than they would be able to secure independently. Furthermore, they provide valuable peer-level visibility into carrier performance, port behavior, and emerging risks, acting as a structural alternative capacity channel alongside direct contracts and NVO deals. This collaborative approach enhances the overall strength and resilience of a shipper's procurement strategy.



In 2026, shippers should allocate a portion of their volume on key trades through associations to maintain a standing alternative in their procurement portfolio. It is also essential to actively engage with these associations by sharing data and comparing experiences, rather than viewing membership as a passive rebate scheme. By fostering a collaborative environment, shippers can enhance their negotiating power and adaptability in an evolving market.

Together, these three legs form a robust capacity strategy that remains stable, even when faced with challenges from individual partners, trades, or ports. This multifaceted approach ensures that shippers can navigate the market's complexities effectively.

3. Use Data as Your Seat: Pricing + Operations Together

A three-legged stool is practical only if the seat is solid; in procurement, that seat is your data layer. To make informed decisions, shippers need to harness both pricing data and operational data. This dual focus ensures that procurement strategies are not only cost-effective but also operationally sound, providing a comprehensive view of the market and performance.



By employing a Bluspark-style intelligence layer, shippers can overlay operational data with pricing information, revealing critical insights such as areas where they may be

overpaying for subpar service. This analysis can also highlight which carriers, services, and ports consistently outperform the competition in terms of reliability. Furthermore, identifying opportunities to change gateways or allocations could result in significant savings on lead times or costs.

For instance, in the Far East-U.S. West Coast (FE-USWC) trade lane, a realistic long-term contract level for 2026 may hover around USD 1,500/FEU, with a reasonable band centered on that baseline. Key questions to consider include: Where are we intentionally paying above the established band, and why are we making those decisions? Conversely, where should we aim to be below the band, and which partners can help achieve that objective?

3.1 Pricing Data

For each shipping lane, shippers should have a clear understanding of several key data points. This includes the all-in cost per FEU, which encompasses base rates, Bunker Adjustment Factors (BAF), General Rate Increases (GRI) or Peak Season Surcharges (PSS), congestion fees, and other surcharges.

Additionally, it is critical to develop forecast bands for 2026 that reflect low, base, and high scenarios rather than relying on a single budget figure.

A comparative analysis of historical awards against market medians and the

shipper's own forecast bands will provide valuable insights into pricing strategies.



3.2 Operational Data

The true differentiation in procurement lies in service providers' performance, not solely in their pricing. It is crucial to track and analyze operational data by lane and provider, focusing on metrics such as on-time performance relative to schedules, roll rates, and premium service usage. Additionally, port and terminal dwell times, instances of blank sailings, and skipped calls should be monitored closely. The speed and quality of recovery following disruptions are also critical metrics that can provide deeper insights into a provider's reliability.

3.3 Incoterms as a Strategic Lever

With comprehensive data in hand, shippers should reassess which parties control various aspects of the freight process. Consider moving toward Free on Board (FOB) or Free Carrier (FCA) terms when shippers wish to maintain control over routing, carrier choice, and performance metrics. Alternatively, utilizing Cost and Freight (CFR), Cost, Insurance, and Freight (CIF), or Delivered terms can be advantageous when suppliers are in a position to secure better deals or capacity. Offering delivered terms to key customers where managing the entire door-to-door experience is a competitive advantage can also enhance service propositions.

Incoterms® 2020 Rules Responsibility Quick Reference Guide											
Inco Docs	Freight Collect Terms						Freight Prepaid Terms				
Groups	Any Mode or Modes of Transport		Sea and Inland Waterway Transport				Any Mode or Modes of Transport				
Incoterm	EXW Ex Works (Place)	FCA Free Carrier (Place)	FAS Free Alongside Ship (Port)	FOB Free On Board (Port)	CFR Cost and Freight (Port)	CIF Cost Insurance & Freight (Port)	CPT Carriage Paid To (Place)	CIP Carriage & Insurance Paid to (Place)	DAP Delivered at Place (Place)	DPU Delivered at Place Unloaded (Place)	DDP Delivered Duty Paid (Place)
Transfer of Risk	At Buyer's Disposal	On Buyer's Transport	Alongside Ship	On Board Vessel	On Board Vessel	On Board Vessel	At Carrier	At Carrier	At Named Place	At Named Place Unloaded	At Named Place
Obligations & Charges:											
Export Packaging	Seller	Seller	Seller	Seller	Seller	Seller	Seller	Seller	Seller	Seller	Seller
Loading Charges	Buyer	Seller	Seller	Seller	Seller	Seller	Seller	Seller	Seller	Seller	Seller
Delivery to Port/Place	Buyer	Seller	Seller	Seller	Seller	Seller	Seller	Seller	Seller	Seller	Seller
Export Duty, Taxes & Customs Clearance	Buyer	Seller	Seller	Seller	Seller	Seller	Seller	Seller	Seller	Seller	Seller
Origin Terminal Charges	Buyer	Buyer	Seller	Seller	Seller	Seller	Seller	Seller	Seller	Seller	Seller
Loading on Carriage	Buyer	Buyer	Buyer	Seller	Seller	Seller	Seller	Seller	Seller	Seller	Seller
Carriage Charges	Buyer	Buyer	Buyer	Buyer	Seller	Seller	Seller	Seller	Seller	Seller	Seller
Insurance	Negotiable	Negotiable	Negotiable	Negotiable	Negotiable	*Seller	Negotiable	**Seller	Negotiable	Negotiable	Negotiable
Destination Terminal Charges	Buyer	Buyer	Buyer	Buyer	Buyer	Buyer	Seller	Seller	Seller	Seller	Seller
Delivery to Destination	Buyer	Buyer	Buyer	Buyer	Buyer	Buyer	Buyer	Buyer	Seller	Seller	Seller
Unloading at Destination	Buyer	Buyer	Buyer	Buyer	Buyer	Buyer	Buyer	Buyer	Buyer	Seller	Seller
Import Duty, Taxes & Customs Clearance	Buyer	Buyer	Buyer	Buyer	Buyer	Buyer	Buyer	Buyer	Buyer	Buyer	Seller

*CIF requires at least an insurance with the minimum cover of the Institute Cargo Clause (C) (number of listed risks, subject to itemized exclusions)
 **CIP now requires at least an insurance with the minimum cover of the Institute Cargo Clause (A) (all risks, subject to itemized exclusions)
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In this way, Incoterms become a design tool within the procurement architecture, moving beyond mere boilerplate language to become integral to the overall strategy. This strategic approach allows shippers to leverage their procurement processes more effectively and adapt to market conditions.

4. A Simple 2026 Blueprint in 5 Steps

1. The first step is to diagnose 2025's performance. This entails creating a detailed analysis for each major shipping lane, focusing on volumes, all-in costs, service issues, and key changes that may have occurred throughout the year.
2. The second step involves segmenting your lanes into distinct categories. These may include mission-critical lanes, cost-leverage opportunities, emerging or volatile routes, and tactical or seasonal lanes. By classifying lanes in this manner, shippers can apply tailored strategies that align with the unique characteristics and requirements of each segment.
3. The third step is to define your three-leg mix for procurement. For each segment, determine the volume split across fixed contracts, NVOCCs, and shipper associations. This allocation will ensure a balanced approach that leverages the strengths of each procurement strategy while mitigating risks across individual channels.
4. In the fourth step, design a Request for Quotation (RFQ) that values both price and performance. Utilize standardized templates and establish clear evaluation criteria that reflect the total value of proposals, rather than simply focusing on the lowest nominal rate. This holistic approach will enhance the procurement process and ensure that shippers select partners that align with their strategic objectives.
5. Finally, in the fifth step, transform your awards into a comprehensive routing guide and capacity playbook. This should outline primary, secondary, and emergency options for each lane, as well as rules for utilizing NVOCC or association capacity. Additionally, provide Incoterms guidance by lane and customer to streamline operational processes.

To enhance the effectiveness of this blueprint, it is essential to layer in two governance pulses. The first pulse occurs post-Chinese New Year (March/April) when adjustments should be made based on the actual performance observed during the extended pre-CNY season and early 2026. The second pulse occurs pre-peak (late summer) when shippers should assess whether to renew, rebid, or reshape their procurement mix ahead of Q4 and 2027.

5. The 2026 Ocean Procurement Checklist

Before initiating your 2026 tender process, it is crucial to ensure that you can affirmatively respond to each of the following assertions regarding your preparation. This includes having a clear understanding of the supply and demand dynamics for 2026, along with the anticipated direction of rates on your key trades.



Shippers should also be well-informed about their base-case long-term rate levels—for example, approximately USD 1,500/FEU on the Far East to U.S. West Coast route—and be able to articulate realistic high and low bands

surrounding that figure. An understanding of how bunker trends influence BAFs and total costs is vital, while also recognizing that fuel costs are not the primary driver of rate levels.

In terms of data and stakeholder alignment, shippers must have completed a comprehensive diagnostic of their 2025 lanes, including both cost and performance metrics. Lanes should be segmented, and a clear risk appetite should be defined by segment. Furthermore, finance, operations, and leadership teams need to be aligned on procurement priorities and trade-offs.

When it comes to capacity strategy and procurement roles, shippers should be fully aware of where fixed contracts, NVOCCs, and shipper associations play primary roles by lane and segment. Target volume splits across these three legs should also be established, along with identifying any gaps where new



NVOCC or association partners may be required to strengthen the strategy.

For the RFQ process and operational readiness, templates should be standardized and easy to compare.

Shippers must be prepared to evaluate bids based on total value, considering not just cost but also performance and resilience. A routing guide and a capacity playbook template should be readily available to be activated immediately following the award process.

If any of these assertions cannot be confidently answered with a “yes,” this indicates the areas where your preparation for 2026 requires further attention and development.

6. Where Bluspark Fits In



Bluspark is dedicated to assisting Beneficial Cargo Owners in transforming this cheat sheet into a tangible 2026 procurement plan through a comprehensive suite of services. We accomplish this by integrating pricing and operational data into a single intelligence layer, enabling informed decision-making grounded in solid evidence.

Additionally, we build lane-specific forecast bands and diagnostics to ensure negotiations are rooted in facts rather than conjecture. Our team specializes in designing and executing RFQs that reflect a three-legged capacity strategy, moving beyond mere rate chasing to encompass broader value considerations. Finally, we translate awarded contracts into live routing guides, dashboards, and governance frameworks that ensure procurement, operations, and finance remain in sync.

As we approach 2026, this is the first time in years that the shipping market genuinely favors well-prepared shippers. The opportunities presented by this environment are substantial, and the crucial question remains: will your organization be ready to seize them?



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