

Before the spot market: a network capacity checklist

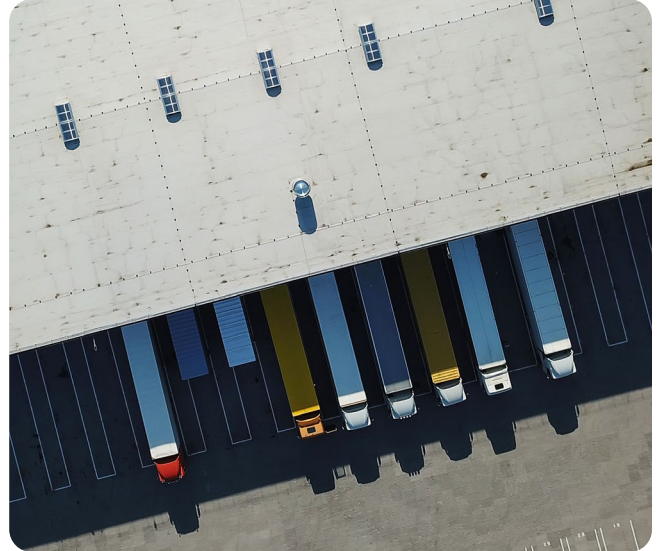
Recover freight capacity before you go to spot

When market rates rise above contracted rates, tender acceptance can fall, particularly on lanes where forecasts, lead times or carrier commitments are out of alignment. Shippers are then forced to buy capacity on the spot market at prices their transportation budgets were not built to absorb.

Before paying a premium for new capacity, look across the network. Existing carrier commitments, unused trailer space, unbalanced lanes, consolidation opportunities and alternative modes may provide capacity that is currently being missed.

Before pursuing new capacity at spot pricing, it's worth checking whether your own network already has room to absorb the volume. Four levers do most of the work, not necessarily in that order, since each is worth weighing alongside the others rather than one at a time.

1. **Multi-pick, multi-drop:** Instead of running one truck for one pickup and one drop, multi-pick and multi-drop routes combine several stops into a single trip. This uses the truck capacity you already have more fully, which reduces how often you need to reach outside your contracted carriers.
2. **Cross-docking:** Cross-docking moves freight directly from inbound to outbound trailers with little or no storage in between. It shortens the path goods take through your network, which can reduce the number of separate moves—and separate tenders—required to get product where it needs to go.
3. **Backhauls:** A backhaul puts freight on a truck's return trip. Carriers price backhaul lanes more competitively because they're recovering revenue on a trip they'd otherwise run empty. Identifying backhaul opportunities in your network can give carriers a reason to prioritize your freight over a spot-market load.
4. **Mode alternatives:** When truckload rates are elevated, alternatives such as intermodal, less than truckload (LTL) or, for some freight, ocean and inland water can offer lower cost per shipment. The tradeoff is transit time: intermodal in particular slows down when rail volume increases, so mode shifting works best on lanes where longer transit is acceptable.



Used together across a full network rather than lane by lane, these four levers can reduce how often you need to go to the spot market at all.

Use the checklist below to assess each of these levers against your own network, lane by lane and location by location, before pricing new capacity at spot.

Your network capacity checklist

- ☐ **Have you mapped backhaul opportunities across your current lanes?**
Look at which of your outbound lanes have a matching return move, and which carriers are running empty on the way back. Backhauls tend to be most effective on inbound loads from vendors or on return trips to distribution centers (DCs). A mapped backhaul gives you a lane to offer a carrier instead of a rate to negotiate.
- ☐ **Are multi-stop pickups or drops available on your highest-volume routes?**
Check your top lanes by volume first, since that's where combining stops saves the most truck capacity. A route with three single-stop trips can sometimes run as one multi-stop trip without changing delivery windows.

☐ **Could any loads be consolidated through cross-docking, rather than moving as separate point-to-point shipments?**
Look at freight that currently sits in storage between inbound and outbound moves: cross-docking it straight through consolidates those loads into fewer, fuller moves, cuts a step out of the process and reduces the number of separate tenders needed. The same approach applies to parcel freight through zone-skipping consolidation, and it can lower costs from extra touches, unloading, reloading, handling and storage while improving delivery service times.

☐ **Have you audited unused capacity with carriers you already hold contracts with?**
Before treating a contracted carrier as unavailable, confirm whether the issue is capacity or rate. A carrier that's rejecting one lane may still have room on another lane in your network.

☐ **Have you identified which lanes could shift to intermodal without missing delivery windows?**
Longer transit times make intermodal a fit for some lanes and not others. Flag the lanes where an extra day or two in transit doesn't put you at risk of a missed delivery window before shifting volume over.

☐ **Are you optimizing capacity across your whole network—including inbound moves from suppliers, not just outbound—rather than location by location?**
A location-by-location view can miss savings that only show up when lanes, carriers and modes are considered together. Inbound and outbound moves often connect: an inbound delivery can pick up an outbound load, and an outbound delivery can bring a return load back, which opens up backhaul opportunities that a network view focused only on outbound flows would miss. Reviewing the end-to-end network surfaces backhaul, load consolidation and mode options that a single-location view won't.

☐ **Are you using software that can evaluate multi-pick, multi-drop, cross-docking and backhaul options together, in one view?**
Evaluating freight shipments together, rather than one at a time, enables strategic transportation decisions that improve capacity utilization while maintaining cost control.

☐ **Are you using digital freight matching to source carrier capacity?**
Automated systems that pull in rates from carriers looking to fill their own capacity can identify competitive options without a manual spot-market search.

☐ **Have you evaluated air, ocean or inland waterway and barge transport for freight?**
These options fit narrower use cases than truckload, but for the freight that qualifies, they might be alternatives worth checking alongside intermodal.

None of these levers require new contracts or new carriers. They start with a closer look at the network you already have. Revisit this checklist each time rates spike, since the lanes with unused capacity can shift as your volume and carrier mix change.

SEE HOW INFIOS HELPS YOU FIND THIS CAPACITY

Spot capacity will always have a role when demand changes unexpectedly or service is at risk. The goal is not to eliminate it but to avoid using it for problems that better planning and network visibility could solve.

Infios Transportation Management (TM) helps teams evaluate carriers, lanes, modes, consolidation opportunities and service constraints across the network. That makes it easier to identify recoverable capacity, compare alternatives, and reserve spot buying for the shipments that truly require it.

Explore how Infios can help improve transportation capacity utilization and cost control.