

Tips for International Shipping

A step-by-step introduction to improve your logistics and retain your customers



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Introduction

Congrats! You've set up your e-commerce shop, witnessed a steady stream of sales, and now you're ready to jump into international expansion, and with that, shipping your product from sea to shining sea.

If this is your first time exporting worldwide, then you've come to the right place. In the next few chapters of this e-book, we'll look at the good, bad, and downright confusing task of shipping to a global audience. But before we get to the details, let's chat about some high-level pros and cons of transporting physical goods on the world stage.

The Pros International Shipping

If you've decided to offer shipping to different countries and continents, you're proactively expanding your customer base, which could equate to more income for your business. Additionally, you no longer have to worry about potential customers finding your product, building a buzz, and then disengaging after they learn there's no way for them to receive your wares.

There are also benefits like brand awareness, flexibility, and new international connections to explore the hidden markets that you didn't even know were clamoring for a product like yours.

So far, international shipping sounds pretty good, right?

The Cons of International Shipping

Yes, global shipping can be a great fit for border-breaking businesses, but it's still important to realize that it's not for every business, even large and established ones. Along with the increased exposure and potential sales, international shipping also has its own special set of considerations.

The weight and size of the items you're selling will have a profound impact on the cost to ship them — an unfortunate circumstance that could dissuade an audience of international buyers from cruising over to your site and hitting your shiny “Checkout” button.

If you bypass that hurdle, sending items all over the globe means you're also subject to a number of import and export laws, both in the country you're shipping to and in your home country. These are, to put it lightly, a huge headache for any exporter. And even if you do decide to outsource that piece to the so-called “pros,” you're still leaving an incredibly important piece of your business in the hands of someone else.

There are also plenty of unexpected snafus to keep in mind that go beyond basic factors. These include taxes, exports, and individual country law. In some examples, an international shipper will refund an order held in customs, only to see it later delivered to the buyer. In situations like these, the merchant is out the cost of the item as well as the item itself!

But before we scare you away, let us reassure you that international shipping can be a spectacular tool wielded to increase brand loyalty and logistical excellence — if you know what you're doing and are prepared to spend some time learning the ropes. If you're still interested in untangling the web of international shipping to discover if it's the right move for you, your business, and your customers, keep reading.

Types of International Shipping

Just like domestic shipping, there are various shipping vendors, times, and dates to consider when choosing a partner for your international needs. And just as in domestic shipping cases, much of the decision-making often comes down to personal preference and how quickly you need to deliver the item to your buyer.

However, there is some baseline information on each of the most popular services, so let's take a look at a few different options:



USPS - **First Class International (FCI)**

- Delivery can take up to 21 days.
- This option is great for packages that are 4 pounds or lighter.
- Packages must be no larger than 36" total when adding together the length, width, and height of the package.
- No tracking or delivery confirmation.
- A PS Form 2976 from customs is needed for all shipments — you'll know you have the right one if it's small and green.
- You'll need to go to the post office to print your shipping labels.
- This is the most affordable USPS shipping option.

USPS - **Global Express Guaranteed**

- Fastest international USPS service, offers date-specific delivery in 1-3 business days.
- Maximum package weight is 70 pounds.
- Includes \$100 in insurance coverage and delivery tracking.
- Most expensive USPS shipping option.

USPS - **Priority Mail International Flat Rate (PMI)**

- Delivery in 6-10 days.
- Tracking information is available, but there is no delivery confirmation.
- Faster arrival times than FCI, but at a higher cost and with less security.
- Maximum package weight is 70 pounds.
- You'll need the PS Form 2976 for small flat rate boxes and envelopes but the larger multi-page customs form PS Form 2976-A for all other shipments.
- Up to a 5% discount for online postage customers.

USPS - **Express Mail International**

- Delivery in 3-5 days.
- More expensive than PMI or FCI.
- Maximum package weight is 70 pounds.
- Date-specific delivery and money-back guarantee for select countries.
- Up to an 8% discount for online postage customers.



FedEx - **Flat-Rate International**

- Typically delivered within 1, 2, or 3 business days.
- For shipments up to 22 or 56 pounds.
- You'll need to pick up the boxes at FedEx.

FedEx - **International First**

- Delivery as early as 9 AM in 2 business days or 10 AM in 3 business days in select countries.
- No third party carrier.
- Saturday pick-ups available.
- Ship up to 150 pounds.

FedEx - **International Priority**

- Delivery in 1, 2, or 3 business days.
- Saturday pick-ups available.
- Ship up to 150 pounds.

FedEx - **Priority Alert**

This is more like an additional layer of protection than an actual shipping type. FedEx Priority Alert pairs a global service analyst with your package. This person monitors your shipment around-the-clock and offers support every step of the way. He or she also ensures your package receives priority placement on aircrafts and priority clearance handling, when available. FedEx also offers special shipping solutions for the **aerospace**, **healthcare**, and **wine** sectors — an important factor considering that USPS refuses to ship any alcoholic

beverages, as you'll see in the prohibited list later in this e-book. If you're looking to ship specialty items like wine, we'd recommend checking with either FedEx or another shipping carrier.

For FedEx, detailed information can be found on their website, but benefits of specialized shipping also include everything from obtaining the proper licenses and authorizations, to temperature controlled shipping to (near) real-time monitoring of your package.



UPS - **Express Critical**

- Delivery on the best available flight 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, 365 days a year.
- Automated routing lets you choose the fastest delivery options.

UPS - **Worldwide Express Plus**, UPS - **Worldwide Express**, UPS - **Worldwide Saver**

- Delivery in 1, 2, or 3 business days.
- Saturday delivery.
- Early morning or by end of day delivery.

UPS - **Worldwide Expedited**, UPS - **Standard**

- This option is Ideal for less urgent shipments.
- UPS Standard only for shipments to Canada and Mexico.

Action Items

- Do your due diligence — not every shipping company is created equal.
- Manage your buyer's expectations before they click purchase.
- Do what's best for your business, which may or may not be the fastest, most expensive option. Most international buyers understand they'll have to wait a few extra days.
- Give them options. Incorporate a few different international shipping choices so buyers can pay a premium on their end if they need your product faster.

Shipping Taxes, Tariffs, & Duties

Ah, everyone's old friend: taxes. If you thought domestic tax was a burden, get ready to hear about the wide, woeful world of international taxes, tariffs, and duties.

Shipping taxes vary from country to country, and different countries also require different declaration forms. For example, when shipping to any of the EU nations, you're required to fill out either a CN22 or CN23 shipping form. Both are forms of sender's declarations, which basically outline the goods included in the package. You're also subject to pay a customs duty, an Import VAT (value of goods + transport charges + duties), and possibly an excise duty (value of goods + transport charges).

The good news on the excise duty is that it's usually only charged on highly-taxed goods like alcohol and cigarettes. The bad news? If those seems like a lot of charges, that's because they are.

Ready for another twist? If the order value of your item is less than 22 euros in Europe, your buyer won't be charged any additional cost. If the value is between 22 euros and 150 euros, the import VAT applies. And if it's over 150 euros, the buyer needs to pay both VAT and the custom duties. Phew, it's enough to make your head spin, isn't it?

To make it even more confusing, the process isn't standardized around the globe. Australia has some of the most lax import laws: anything under \$1,000 AUD isn't subject to tax and duties. But in places like Japan, all packages are put through a rigorous customs clearance where duties and taxes are calculated at the time of arrival.

To find out more about different taxation and duty charges, check out the resource WorldTariff.com. While you'll have to pay a fee, the service puts you in touch with trade specialists and includes up-to-date information on taxes and tariffs everywhere, including any target markets you happen to eyeball.

"Wait..." you may be thinking after reading through that last section, "my buyer is paying for these charges?" Unfortunately, yes, unless you're savvy enough to have read this guide. Obviously surprise charges that haven't been communicated to the customer could be

detrimental to the long-term health and vitality of your company, so pay **close attention** to this next part.

You should be shipping everything you send with the title “**Delivery Duty Paid**” or “**Free Domicile**.” This not only ensures a smooth pick-up for your buyer, but it also lets customs know that you’re paying for all duties and taxes on your end, so they shouldn’t charge your buyer anything additional.

Beware of services offering “**Pre-paid**” or “**Free on Board**” labeling. This simply means you’re agreeing to pay for the shipping, or for the fees, just until the package arrives in its destination country, not your buyer’s doorstep. How will you know if you’ve selected the right option? Check with your shipping provider, and ask about baking in an international shipping and handling fee to your long-term shipping plans.

At this stage, we have to offer up a warning. While you may have heard through the grapevine to simply label your packages as “gifts” in an effort to forgo the types of fees we’ve listed above, this is a very, very bad idea. Falsifying information like that could land you — and your business — in very serious hot water with the authorities, and it’s not worth the potential savings. Honesty is definitely the best policy when dealing with customs, even if it ends up costing you a bit more to get that precious item into the hands of its new owner.

Action Items

- Decide whether you’ll ship to all countries or select countries based on their import taxes and duties.
- Don’t leave your buyer out in the cold — double check all shipping vernacular and choose the correct option.
- Consider working with a shipping provider to handle the logistical fees.
- Don’t fudge your custom forms to save pennies; it’ll cost you down the line.

Legal

Finally, the section you've been waiting to dig into: legal! Just kidding. Our guess is you're probably not too excited to get tangled up in technical jargon and confusing dead-ends, so we'll do our best to keep this simple.

We'll start first with import restrictions. While you'd have no problem selling a butane lighter to a buyer in Tennessee, shipping it over to Paris would result in a big, fat **no**. The reason isn't because the French hate lighters, but because the French Government doesn't allow butane cigarette lighters into the country. If you think that's strange, get ready to be wowed. There are countless other restrictions and rules in every country that you'll look to ship to. Here's another example: jewelry is only permitted in Australia when it's sent as an insured parcel using Priority Mail International service.

And if the products you're shipping contain any of the items on this list, think again about shipping internationally. These items can't be mailed at all through the USPS (though you may have a bit more leeway with a company like FedEx):

- Aerosols
- Air bags
- Alcoholic beverages
- Ammunition
- Cigarettes
- Dry Ice
- Explosives
- Fresh fruits and vegetables
- Gasoline
- Nail Polish
- Perfumes Containing Alcohol
- Poison
- Pool Chemicals

For an *almost* nearly-exhaustive list on what can and can't be shipped worldwide, check out the [USPS country list of prohibited items](#).

Ok, so you're cleared to ship and you've informed your buyer of any applicable charges on their end. Now what? The next step is to fill out a customs form. The USPS makes it easy with their

Click-N-Ship tool that prints forms for you. They also let you know which forms to fill out depending on the type of shipment and how you're sending it.

For shipments on all other carriers, do your due diligence and call a customer service representative until you have a good handle on which form to fill out, and when. On average, you should expect to set aside time to fill out at least three documents: **International Air Waybill**, **Commercial Invoice**, and a **Certificate of Origin**.

- The International Air Waybill is basically the bill of lading with more information for customs, including the value and weight of each item.
- The Commercial Invoice details more information about the items in the package and helps custom officers identify if they need to open the package for inspection.
- The Certificate of Origin details where the items in the package were made. This may seem easy enough, but this information may be difficult to organize if you had items shipped to you for assembly in the US from somewhere like Mexico or China, for example. In this case, it's best to check with your shipping provider to ensure you're labeling the materials correctly for arrival in whatever country they end up.

Last but not least, if you're shipping items valued at more than \$2,500 USD, you may need to fill out a **Shippers Export Declaration**. This document lists many of the same things as the forms above, as well as information about you, your company, and your buyer. Skipping this part of the process could seriously delay your package delivery and, in some cases, doing it incorrectly could end up in a returned package (and a less than satisfied customer).

Remember, you're opening up your business to international buyers to expand your brand on a global level — don't hinder your efforts by rushing through the process as a means to an end. As the saying goes, first impressions stick around, even if they're thousands of miles away.

Action Items

- Check the USPS prohibited list of items to ship in each country.
- Master the art of the three most common customs forms.
- Fill it out once, check it twice. And then get one of the pros to proofread your handiwork until you're comfortable with the process.

Planes, Boats, & Trucks

When you send your package out to be shipped, how does it actually reach to your buyer? Freight? Air? Bicycle courier? Drone?

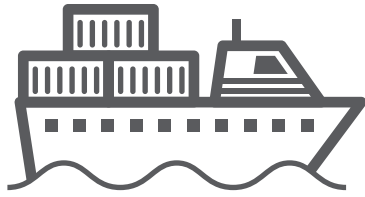
This may seem like a small piece of the puzzle, but it's ultimately one of the most important factors that helps ensure your shipments reach a happy customer on the other end. And more than just that, we'd also say it's important to ensure a happy bottom line for you, the soon-to-be star international shipper.



If you're shipping across waterways, there are two methods of getting it to its destination: boat or plane. But let's take a step back. In both situations on either side of the water, there's usually a different form of transportation carrying your package: a truck.

The size and weight of your item, and whether you're shipping multiple items or a single package, will determine if you have a full or partial truckload. Partial truckloads — also called **less-than-truckloads**, or **LTL** — make up the bulk of freight shipments and are probably what you'll be dealing with the most.

The average weight of LTL freight is about 1,200 pounds, though it can range anywhere from 100 to 15,000 pounds. If you're shipping more than that, you'd probably want to work with a broker to capitalize on some discounts. Or, if your shipment is smaller and limited to just a few packages, hiring a pick-up service or dropping it off yourself is the most economical route to take.



Now that we have the package in the supply chain for delivery, the next option to consider is whether to transport it via air or ocean between coasts. A benefit of shipping by airplane is that it's exponentially faster than shipments sent on boats. However, depending on the size and weight of your shipment, it can be costly.

So when would you use sea delivery? Mainly, when you're moving a large shipment that's not time sensitive. Keep in mind that travel time between a US port and a EU port can take anywhere from 10-12 days, not including handling and other means of transportation or customs checks.

Additionally, shipments sent by sea are also subject to the **Bunker Adjustment Factor (BAF)**. BAF is an additional charge levied on shippers to compensate for the price of a ship's fuel. To calculate the current BAF, check out the [Maersk Line calculator](#).

For most deliveries to international buyers, the resources outlined in **Chapter 1** should suffice. However, if you start shipping larger freight weights on a regular basis, looking into different route options is definitely not a bad idea.

Action Items

- Decide how much you're shipping at any one time.
- Identify if plane, boat, truck, or a combo is your best option.
- Overestimate costs in the initial phases of shipping and adjust accordingly once you can more accurately predict future costs.

How to Price

As sure as gravity exists, be sure that buyers, international or otherwise, love free shipping. Now, we're not saying that it is in any way feasible to offer free shipping on a global scale, but it tends to almost be an expectation in some markets. So how do you even start to process such an endeavor? Let's look to the king of the free shipping world, online shoe magnate [Zappos](#), to shed some light on this issue.

It's widely known in the online shopping world that Zappos offers free shipping and free returns on all purchases. How do they do it and still manage to maintain one of the most profitable online businesses around? We're about to tell you a little-known secret: *Zappos' free shipping isn't actually free*. What do we mean? "I bought shoes there last week and they didn't charge me a dime," you may be thinking. Those shoes probably cost you a bit more money than they would have elsewhere. That's because your shipping was already baked into the cost of the shoes. But because you're programmed for deals and 1-click instant gratification (like everyone else around the world!) you overlooked the small uptick in Zappos' pricing in favor of the attractive offer and perceived value you received.

Smart on Zappos part? Absolutely. Realistic for your business? That's for you to decide.

If you can't offer free shipping all the time or inject that cost into your prices, maybe you're able to offer it to your customer base a few times a year around big sales pushes and high- or low-traffic times. Unfortunately, we can't tell you how to structure the financial piece of your business without sitting down and taking a fine-toothed comb through your numbers.

That said, the reason we bring this section up is to get you thinking differently about the whole shipping question. Are international buyers more likely to purchase from you if they're under the perception that they're not paying to have a product sent from Texas to Berlin? Maybe, maybe not. But at the end of the day, it can't hurt to have a company meeting and kick around some creative options for giving buyers what they really (think) they want.

Which...is probably free shipping.

Action Items

- Look to other e-commerce stores for shipping price inspiration.
- Brainstorm creative solutions for shipping incentive programs throughout the year.
- Be honest with yourself about what your business can and cannot adequately accommodate. Re-evaluate on a quarterly or yearly basis.

Returns

You cried, bled, and sacrificed hours of your life researching international shipping. Then you shipped your amazing product overseas and fulfilled the tariffs, taxes, and duties like an international shipping ninja. Your buyer then received the product in its perfect international shipping packaging adorned with customs stamps and a lifetime of shipping stories. And then? Well, then they decided to return it.

Sigh. After you've picked your broken heart up off the floor, it's time to take action and reclaim your item — to bring it home to the motherland. Here's how to do it.

If you shipped with someone like USPS or FedEx, or found your own independent company like [BorderFree](#), many of those services have return handling built into their programs. The process looks vaguely similar to the one we outlined for getting your shipment TO a destination country, only this time you'll be dealing with your own country's customs, taxes, and duties.

Something to keep in mind in this stage is that, sometimes, it may not be worth the cost of shipping the item back to you. In that case, many of these services specialize in certified destruction or resale through secondary markets. We'd recommend calling your shipping company and talking through those options if that's of interest.

If you're shipping to Canada and Australia through the USPS, you can take advantage of a new program that they've just unrolled to solve this e-commerce dilemma. Here's how it works:

- You complete a Customized Mail Agreement
- Create return labels online or through a Web Tools API
- Print a customs form that identifies the package as a return

Easy enough, though this process does take some foresight, as it will need to be handled prior to shipping your product out initially. However, it saves your customer the headache of dealing with the postage and custom documentation and hopefully creates a positive and seamless experience that encourages them to buy from you again.

Action Items

- Get a massage to lessen the stress brought on by international shipping.
- Forgive your customer for wanting to return your product.
- Identify a company that can help you with return processing.
- Decide whether you want your item returned or if you'd rather destroy it/resell it in a secondary market.
- Be prepared to deal with US Customs and any associated fees on the way back across the border.

Conclusion

We hope that after reading through the above documentation you feel more prepared to tackle the world of international shipping head-on.

While it definitely takes time, energy, and resources to conquer this behemoth of global commerce, if you do it correctly, you could see the return on your investment pay off in ways big and small.

As with anything, keeping an open mind and asking questions along the way is the ultimate path to success and a lifetime of happy and prosperous worldwide sales.

Have questions about these principles and tips or want to share your experience with applying them?

Connect with us on [Twitter](#), [Facebook](#), or [LinkedIn](#).

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Global payments made easy.

A worldwide leader in payment services, 2Checkout maximizes online sales conversions by giving global buyers localized payment options. Trusted by over 50,000 merchants, 2Checkout supports transactions in 196 countries through 8 payment methods, 26 currencies, and 15 languages, forming one of the leading processors of online transactions in the world. The service is simple to implement, including a pre-integrated payment gateway, a merchant account, PCI compliance, international fraud prevention, and plug-ins for 100 of the most popular carts.

Connect with 2Checkout and learn more about how our services can enable you to implement these principles.

[Connect >>](#)

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Andrea is a writer and strategist who currently lives in New York City. For the last six years, she's worked as a social media strategist, brand consultant, and copywriter for brands including AT&T, Calvin Klein, and FADER Magazine. She currently writes on topics of culture, food, social media marketing, and travel.