



The secret to selecting the best logistics puzzlers

By John A. Gentle, DLP

ONCE YOU RETIRE FROM THE TRADITIONAL 7:00 a.m. to 8:00 p.m. work days, new hobbies and picture puzzles become a part of everyday life. Sounds boring? Well, it's just the opposite.

Ron and Linda Arnett, highly skilled “puzzlers” with extraordinary insight and sequential awareness, recently introduced me to picture puzzles. Their tutelage provided me with a greater appreciation of the challenges logisticsicians face in determining the fine points of vendor qualification criteria, assembling the best pre-qualified providers, and selecting the players who can do the precise points of detailed tasks both effortlessly and consistently.

This is what I've learned about puzzles and what expert logisticsicians recognize:

1. *You don't buy a puzzle without a complete picture.* Clearly identifying the picture of success is vital to assembling any puzzle problem. The picture, with all its levels of detail and complexity, provides clues as to how the information can be collected, segregated into smaller tasks, the resources required to solve it, and which groups will be tasked with the assembly.

2. *Not all puzzle problems are alike or have simple, well-defined borders.* The more challenging and intriguing ones have irregular borders that require unorthodox approaches or the coordination of multiple puzzlers and elements.

3. *Coordination is critical.* You cannot assume that groups will not overreach, hoard, or deny others access to critical info/shapes/colors.

4. *Sorting parts and players into groups is very basic.* Unique shading, superimposed images, subtle lines and shapes, however, create additional challenges and opportunities for differentiation.

5. *Not all puzzles problems have conventional and convenient interlocking pieces.* They can be free standing, often look alike, and sometimes simply about the other pieces.

6. *Force fitting does not work.* Missing pieces are obvious and render the puzzle worthless.

7. *Putting a small identifiable element of the puzzle problem together is nice, but it should be considered a small victory.* Until all sub groups are assembled the puzzle is incomplete and meaningless.

So what does this mean to logistics professionals? First, your team needs to be patient, detail oriented, skilled, organized, and should cooperate in a manner that allows the picture to develop in a timely manner. Second, you must identify the unique characteristics needed and then screen every potential business partner beyond the basics. Just finding companies that have years of experience in trucking or warehousing is simply not good enough.

What is important is the strength and depth of the culture of their company; their guiding principles; the quality of all of their processes; and the talent and commitment of every operational group—not just their customer service department whose job it is to make you

Your team needs to be patient, detail oriented, skilled, organized, and should cooperate in a manner that allows the picture to develop in a timely manner.

smile or feel good when things go awry.

Finding the right companies only happens when you ask the right in-depth questions in your RFQ and you take the time to visit and speak personally with only those companies with operational teams that are in a strong position to earn your business. While supplier sales and ownership are certainly important, it's the operational teams that have to solve the puzzles on a daily basis and need to be measured for strength and depth.

Keep in mind that great logistic partners are skilled puzzlers. They're accustomed to dealing with irregularities every day, they look for the big picture in their approach, and they work proactively and effortlessly with their colleagues instead of wandering aimlessly and inefficiently searching for clues.

Anyone can put a small “kids” picture puzzle together. Complex logistics problems are full of clues and require in-depth talent from your team and from your suppliers working together to unlock their secrets and assemble a winning picture. Take the time to find and keep the best puzzlers. □

John A. Gentle is president of John A. Gentle & Associates, LLC, a Supply Chain consulting firm assisting shippers, carriers, 3PLs, and distribution centers in the management of their logistical disciplines. A recipient of several industry awards, he has more than 40 years of experience in transportation, warehousing, and materials management. He can be reached at jag@RelaTranShips.