INSIGHT

ProvisionAi

How Shippers Can Lower Truckload Freight Cost in a Tight Market.

27 ways to keep control when trucks are scarce and rates keep climbing.

By Tom Moore, Founder and CEO, ProvisionAi · October 2026



USE WHAT YOU PAY FOR / SMOOTH THE VOLUME

TODAY'S MARKET

A MARKET THAT HAS LOST ITS CUSHION

Truckload freight is one of the largest lines in a supply chain budget and, this year, one of the hardest to predict. Shippers we work with say capacity used to run about 8% ahead of freight; today the two are close to one for one.

Contract rates are up about a third from a year ago and spot rates nearly half. None of that is in a shipper's control, but much of the freight bill still is. These 27 steps come from what we see across large shippers and from established practice.

≈⅓

RISE IN DRY VAN CONTRACT RATES VS. A YEAR AGO

≈½

RISE IN DRY VAN SPOT RATES VS. A YEAR AGO

≈ +20%

COST OF A LOAD THAT GOES TO THE THIRD TENDER OR LATER

Sources: DAT Freight & Analytics (Sept 2026); FreightWaves SONAR (Oct 2026). Capacity cushion as reported by shippers we work with.

PART 1 / WAYS 1–4

USE WHAT YOU PAY FOR

A survey of 150,000 trucks showed 91% could take an additional pallet.

01 Re-engineer packaging around trailer space

Review carton sizes, pallet patterns and protective material with packaging and supplier teams. A longer project, but it puts more product on every truck.

EXAMPLE Reducing head space in cartons allowed another layer on each pallet.

02 Consolidate orders going to the same destination

Combine orders headed to the same place. It is hard to do by hand, because orders arrive at different times with different ship dates; it is work we do with software.

EXAMPLE Amazon delivers to rural quadrants on set days of the week.

03 Build every load to the trailer's real limits

Plan against the actual trailer, its dimensions, legal payload and axle limits, not a case count or a 40,000-pound rule of thumb.

EXAMPLE A food company eliminated 30 deployment loads a month by maximizing payload.

04 Give loaders a plan they can build

Mixed pallets need a diagram for that shipment, showing where each one goes. Without it, loaders play it safe and trucks leave light. Our AutoO2 draws one for every load.

EXAMPLE A major CPG company cut training time by 80% and got better load fill.

PART 2 / WAYS 5–9

SMOOTH THE VOLUME CARRIERS SEE

Carriers plan trucks around your usual volume. When a lane ships 40 loads one day and 12 the next, the carrier declines the spike, and those loads move down the routing guide at a higher price.

Same week. Same total.
Very different lane.

40	12
LOADS / ONE DAY	LOADS / THE NEXT

05 Connect inbound and outbound to cut empty miles

Pair inbound and outbound moves, or coordinate with other shippers, so carriers aren't running empty to reach you. A return load improves the price on both legs.

WHY It cuts deadhead.

06 Move loads off the peak days

Monday, Friday, month-end and quarter-end pushes create days your carriers didn't plan for. Where service allows, move loads off them so each carrier sees a steady number.

WHY On peak days, you are competing for capacity.

07 Plan within what each site can ship and receive

Compare the next two weeks of volume at each site with its best recent performance. Scheduling beyond what a dock can handle creates waiting, detention and missed appointments.

WHY A dock that runs over its limit makes drivers wait, and carriers price that in.

08 Give carriers more notice

A carrier needs only origin, destination, date and equipment to commit a truck; the contents can wait. The shipper who tenders first usually gets the capacity.

WHY Why not build the load before tendering? Because closer to ship date you have updated information.

09 Smooth replenishment before it reaches transportation

Inventory thresholds, safety-stock changes and weekend sales pile replenishment onto the same few days. Plan flows 20 to 40 days ahead and update daily. Our LevelLoad does this.

WHY The premium cost of using non-core carriers is more than 20%.



PART 3 / WAYS 10–12

STOP PAYING FOR TIME AT THE DOCK

Drivers are paid by the mile, so hours at a dock are lost income. Carriers remember which sites waste their day, and price it in or decline the next tender.

10 Stop paying for trucks to wait

Use drop-and-hook where you can, stage freight before the truck arrives, have paperwork ready, and set appointments the dock can keep.

WHY As drivers put it: “You can't pay me enough to wait.”

11 Widen pickup and delivery windows

Longer shipping and receiving hours help carriers fit your loads into drivers' schedules. Weigh the savings against the added warehouse staffing.

WHY Wider windows let carriers get higher equipment utilization.

12 Treat drivers as people

Carriers struggle to staff sites where drivers wait long and are treated poorly. Clean restrooms, a place to rest and a respectful check-in cost little.

WHY Some sites are “blackballed” by drivers.

PART 4 / WAYS 13–22

BUY CAPACITY THAT SHOWS UP

A low contract rate saves money only when the carrier takes the load. Pay for capacity that accepts your freight, not just the lowest quote.

13 Buy reliable capacity, not the lowest rate

Track how often each awarded carrier accepts your tenders and what replacements cost. On lanes with frequent rejections, backups erase the savings you negotiated.

WHY Your time is money too.

14 Rebid the lanes that keep failing

Run mini-bids on lanes that are uncompetitive or repeatedly rejected. Check your own pattern first: a new carrier will reject the same volume spikes (way 9).

WHY Carriers' networks change. They have to adapt, and so should you.

15 Benchmark rates before you book

On lower-volume lanes, compare carriers and brokers against current lane benchmarks, fuel and accessorials included, rather than taking the first quote.

WHY Brokers and carriers price the same lane differently.

16 Match the buying method to the lane

Steady, recurring freight suits contracted capacity. Irregular lanes may do better on spot or market-based pricing. Decide lane by lane.

WHY Carriers want consistency.

17 Use regional carriers where their network fits

A carrier already running near your origin can beat one that has to reposition equipment. Award enough volume to make the lane worth its attention.

WHY It expands your market.

PART 4 / WAYS 13–22, CONTINUED

BUY CAPACITY THAT SHOWS UP

IS YOUR SOURCING PRICING THE NETWORK?

A good sourcing process already covers ways 18 to 22. The question is whether yours does, now that carriers are turning down more tenders.

18 Ask for package bids on connected lanes

Ask carriers to price a round trip or a sequence of loads alongside single lanes, and compare the package against separate awards.

WHY Minimizing carrier deadhead cuts your costs too.

19 Offer guaranteed reloads

Commit to a next load with compatible equipment and realistic timing in exchange for a lower combined price. The commitment has to be dependable.

WHY Same as way 18: less deadhead for the carrier means lower costs for you.

20 Consider transparent brokerage pricing

A carrier-cost-plus-fee model shows what you pay for the truck and what you pay the broker. It still needs disciplined buying to work.

WHY Uber Freight suggested this when margins were bad. We wonder if they still think that.

21 Check intermodal on long lanes

On long lanes with flexible transit time, intermodal can cost less door to door. Count drayage and inventory in transit, and commit the freight early.

WHY Trains use fewer drivers and less fuel.

22 Negotiate accessorials before they happen

Settle detention, layover, stop-off and truck-ordered-not-used terms with the base rate. A low linehaul quote loses its edge once extra charges arrive.

WHY Nobody likes surprises.

PART 5 / WAYS 23–25

MANAGE FUEL

Diesel hit a record weekly average of **$6.53 a gallon** in September 2026. You can't set the price, but you decide how it reaches your freight bill.

23 Fix the fuel surcharge formula

Separate fuel from linehaul, check base price, mileage and fuel-economy assumptions, and use regional prices where your lanes differ.

WHY Trucks get better mileage today than they did 10 years ago.

24 Hedge with a plan, not in a panic

Hedging looks attractive when prices spike, which is the worst time to start. Fixed-price protection costs you when prices fall. Match any hedge to your forecast exposure.

WHY Professionals trade diesel every day; you don't have an advantage.

25 Tie your surcharge to the region you ship in

Use a fuel management specialist such as Breakthrough Fuel, or tie your surcharge to the region in which you are shipping.

WHY California skews fuel costs.

PART 6 / WAYS 26–27

CONTROL AND MEASURE

Two habits keep the freight bill honest and show where the next savings are.

26 Audit invoices against the agreement

Check billed rates, fuel and extra charges against the contract. Recover the errors, fix their causes, and take the cleaner data into your next negotiation.

WHY Trust, but verify.

27 Measure what drives the cost

Most freight reports show what was spent, not why. Track tender acceptance, truck fill, dock capacity, overweight loads and trucks ordered but not used. Start with the five numbers below.

WHY What you measure, you control.

A ONE-PAGE SELF-CHECK

FIVE NUMBERS TO CHECK THIS WEEK

All five come from data most shippers already have. Any one on the wrong side of the line is where the savings are.

	CHECK	WHAT IT TELLS YOU	WHERE THE LINE IS
01	**First-tender acceptance on your top 10 lanes**	Whether awarded carriers take your freight	**Below 90%** Loads are moving down the routing guide at a higher price.
02	**Average payload as a share of legal capacity**	How much paid-for space leaves empty	**Below 90%** Trucks leave with capacity you already paid for.
03	**Share of loads moved on the spot market**	How much planning pushes off contract	**Above 15%** Planning is creating cost it doesn't need to.
04	**Day-over-day swing in loads on key lanes**	How unpredictable you look to carriers	**Above 30%** Carriers price that swing into your rates.
05	**Detention hours per load**	How much driver time your docks consume	**Any steady detention** Carriers will price it in.

Thresholds: ProvisionAi, *Reducing Transportation Costs for High-Volume Shippers*.



THE BOTTOM LINE

MOST OF THE SAVINGS ARE INSIDE YOUR NETWORK

Waiting time, unused trailer space and volatile volumes drive much of the truckload bill, and a shipper influences all three. Those decisions are made inside your network every day, so most of the savings are there too.

WAITING TIME | UNUSED TRAILER SPACE | SHIPMENT VOLATILITY

WHAT THREE SHIPPERS CHANGED

10%+

RIVIANA FOODS

Lower freight cost per lane after building every truck to its legal limit with AutoO2.

97%

KIMBERLY-CLARK

First-tender acceptance after smoothing shipments 30 days ahead with LevelLoad.

5%+

A GLOBAL CONSUMER GOODS LEADER

Lower freight cost after redesigning order guidelines so every load ships full and legal.

ABOUT PROVISIONAI

ProvisionAi builds planning software for high-volume shippers. AutoO2 builds each load to its legal limit; LevelLoad smooths replenishment 30 days ahead. Both run alongside the systems a shipper already has.

Want a second opinion on one lane?

BOOK 20 MINUTES WITH TOM MOORE →

Or run the free 15-minute Loss Analysis.

Sources. Market data: DAT Freight & Analytics, September 2026 truckload rates; FreightWaves SONAR, tender premiums (Oct 2026); EIA weekly on-highway diesel prices (Sep 2026). Supporting research and practice: MIT Center for Transportation & Logistics; EPA SmartWay; C.H. Robinson; DAT; Uber Freight; J.B. Hunt; Schneider; Worldwide Express; Breakthrough Fuel; U.S. Bank. Client results: ProvisionAi case studies. Thresholds: ProvisionAi, Reducing Transportation Costs for High-Volume Shippers.