

Agents of change?

why ship agents are more essential than ever



*Unloading steel coils
at the Port of New
Orleans.*

'Call The Agent': ASBA member ship agents – tested – trusted – certified

Many may recall a poem — 'Call The Agent' — that made the rounds in the maritime industry publications and via emails many moons ago but still rings true today. The poem, with a little tongue in cheek, accurately highlights the breadth and scope of service provided by your ship's agent. The poem can be found on ASBA's website.

As the poem quite clearly states, maritime principals always:

- ❖ **Call the Agent** in advance of the vessel's arrival for current port restrictions and accurate port costs;
- ❖ **Call the Agent** to arrange and handle the vessel's time in port; and
- ❖ **Call the Agent** following vessel's departure to ensure that the Statement of Facts documents the vessel call and the FDA is expeditiously prepared.

In a recent survey conducted by the Association of Ship Brokers & Agents (USA) Inc. (ASBA), maritime principals ranked the qualities deemed most important in their decision to appoint

a ship's agent.

- ❖ fiscally responsible company;
- ❖ trained boarding agents; and
- ❖ past experience with the ship agent and the agent's experience with the cargo and vessel type.

ASBA's Agent Member Certification is renewed annually and specifically addresses these qualities. This month, ASBA celebrates eleven years of its Agent Member Certification. However, in order to describe what it means to be ASBA certified — what, exactly, is an agent, and what does an agent do?

"Except for the pilot, the first and last person to board or depart during every ship's port call is the ship's agent." The agent is like a control tower for a ship's port call, co-ordinating local scheduling and logistics with the key players — the owner, charterer, shipper, receiver, terminal, and, of course, the ship.

The agent dispatches the local services necessary for a

successful port call, arranging pilotage, towage, and customs entry and clearance, while navigating deftly through the myriad national and local regulatory requirements involving the ship and her cargo and crew. Beyond the commercial operation there is an often extensive list of husbanding requirements that includes the coordination of ship's stores and spare parts as well as crew changes, crew medical, and service technicians.

An agent's job is to safely and economically expedite the vessel's port call. They must understand the impact of high daily operating costs of ships and marine terminal, the pressures of berth congestion, and contract deadlines for loading and unloading cargoes. Solid rapport and good standing within the local maritime community is critical. The agent stands in the shoes of his or her principal protecting their interests at all times.

FISCAL RESPONSIBILITY

ASBA member agents must retain an external Certified Public Accountant to complete a procedural review in order to attest in writing to ASBA that the member maintains separate files by principal and that all financial transactions are properly supported by invoices and receipts that tie back to their general ledger. Fiscally sound accounting practices of their ship's agent should be a key component of the principal's risk management strategy.

TRAINED

Certified Agent Members must maintain a well-trained staff that is service-oriented and armed with knowledge to make necessary decisions on behalf of their principals. All member boarding agents and their managers must successfully complete a comprehensive exam administered by ASBA.

ASBA provides a variety maritime courses and seminars on

shipbroking, chartering, and agency to meet the needs of members for initial training and ongoing education. Other courses offered by ASBA include maritime law, marine insurance, and commercial trade transactions. ASBA also hosts an Annual Cargo Conference that has become the 'must attend' maritime event in the USA providing member agents with another avenue to expand their industry knowledge. Panellists include charterers, owners, and operators that share their thoughts on the "hot" topics of the year as well as their views on the market and trends in shipping.

EXPERIENCE

ASBA's 30 member agents handle over 43,000 vessel calls annually in the USA and Canada. Approximately 14,000 were dry bulk and break bulk vessels. Based on the Association's calculations, ASBA Certified Agents have represented close to 65% of the dry and wet bulk calling US ports last year. In terms of experience, these statistics tell a clear story!

ASBA formed in 1934. Members use the Association to address issues affecting their companies and principals on a national level — and to advocate for quality. ASBA's landmark member certification was embraced by its international counterpart, the Federation of National Associations of Ship Brokers & Agents (FONASBA) in 2007, known as the FONASBA Quality Standard, and is now being awarded in 24 member countries. Owner's organizations, BIMCO, INTERTANKO and INTERCARGO, recognized the value of promoting "quality" in the appointment of ship agents when they endorsed the Quality Standard.

As a best practice supporting operational excellence and risk mitigation, ASBA encourages all vessel charterers, owners, and operators to nominate and appoint ASBA-certified FONASBA QS agents around the world whenever possible. Vet your agent like you vet your ships!