

SHIPPING



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FRIENDS FOR 45 YEARS: Rod Ulloa, left, and Joe Torres launched Cargo Import Brokers in 1988. Ulloa oversees imports, while Torres handles freight forwarding.

It's a two-way street

Importing and freight forwarding have taken two longtime friends far in building a cargo business whose specialty is Houston

By SANDRA BRETTEG
HOUSTON CHRONICLE

FORTY-FIVE years ago, local businessmen Joe Torres and Rod Ulloa launched a friendship that ultimately would turn into a multimillion-dollar brokerage business for importers and exporters.

When the two first met in New Orleans in 1965, little did they know that 23 years later they would quit their jobs to form Cargo Import Brokers in north Houston.

Torres, 67, a native of Honduras, handles freight forwarding, while partner Ulloa, a Costa Rican native, oversees imports. The two have weathered the closing of a second office for their company in New Orleans in the 1990s; a technology revolution that forever changed the way

they market their company; and government oversight that has grown progressively stricter since 9/11.

"But we're still having fun," Ulloa said. "And our families even socialize together, even after all of this time."

200 clients

The two launched Cargo Import Brokers in 1988. Designed to handle both freight forwarding — which involves moving cargo to international destinations — and importing — which involves processing cargo here from overseas — the firm has since amassed some 200 clients.

While first-year revenues barely covered the two businessmen's salaries, last year their firm garnered revenue of \$6.5 million, Ulloa said.

"This is a very

competitive business, and now most of our referrals come from the Internet," Ulloa said. "Our specialty is Houston, whether shipping from the port here or handling freight for oil field services clients."

"We've worked with everyone from Halliburton to smaller firms," Torres said. "Our specialty includes shipping drilling equipment, commercial vehicles and heavy machinery."

Space shuttle parts

Some of the most interesting items the firm has shipped include space shuttle parts for a NASA joint venture; giant offshore oil rigs; and Chilean sea bass, which is regulated by no less than four government agencies — including U.S. Customs and the United States Department

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of Agriculture.

The business also cleared the seized assets of Stanford Financial Group's offices on the Caribbean island of Antigua for the U.S. government.

According to both owners, the biggest changes in their industry involve

government regulations. While inspections of goods coming into this country by air and sea was heightened after 9/11, Ulloa said it's only since January 2009 that some of the most restrictive legislation has been put into place.

"There were a lot of complaints about customs not being careful enough with things being imported here, so they stepped it up early last year," Ulloa said. "A lot of customers still don't realize that the penalties — which go into effect at the end of this month — can be thousands of dollars if the paperwork's not done correctly."

According to Steven Lott, a spokesman for the International Air Transport Association, laws passed by Congress in 2007 ultimately call for screening 100 percent of all cargo that arrives in the U.S. by later this year.

"Which is a big issue for both airlines and shipping companies," Lott said. "Eighteen months after Congress passed that legislation, we were at 50 percent. The other issue is what 'screening' actually means. Does that mean opening up every pallet and searching every widget, or using bomb-sniffing dogs? There are a lot of issues to clear up before we get to 100 percent."

For now, the two men have no plans to alter their business model, other than to continuously improve their Web site and offer customers updated information about government regulations.

To that end, they've launched a blog on importing and exporting regulations at the company's site: www.customs-broker-houston.com.

Cargo Import Brokers, Inc.
Rod Ulloa & Joe Torres
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