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Commercial approach during a market crisis in the Freight Forwarding Industry

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Abstract

Relevant topics - Commercial strategies for client retention, management strategies during market crisis and the Freight Forwarding Industry Volatility.

Purpose - This study investigates the commercial strategies employed by sales and account management professionals within the freight forwarding industry to enhance client retention during periods of market crisis. The primary objective is to identify the specific techniques and commercial approaches that prove most effective in preserving and strengthening business relationships amidst systemic volatility. The research adopts a dual-perspective approach, examining the strategies implemented by freight forwarders and the corresponding experiences and expectations of their clients. By analyzing these perspectives, the study aims to develop a framework of best practices for commercial crisis management in the logistics sector.

Academic and Managerial Relevance - Throughout history several crises had big impacts on the freight forwarding industry and they have changed the way crisis are managed. Over the last few years there have been big events that have severely impacted this industry such as the COVID-19 Pandemic, the blockage on the Suez Canal and more recently the ILA Strikes on the US ports that produce a domino effect on a global scale. Freight forwarders that deal with international clients that provide services on a global scale must constantly adapt and reinvent themselves in order to mitigate these events and it is getting harder to maintain clients with such market volatility. Using personal professional experience throughout the years it has been brought to attention that this industry is in constant change and that client demands are ever increasing. The biggest difficulties lie on price volatility and availability and crisis events like these are continuing to create a big impact on the business. This theme is presented to be a very current theme and also one of the biggest hardships that this area faces so this investigation will try to gather more information and knowledge that may be of great use for companies in the same area of business.

Methodology- The methodology used in this study will be combining a thorough review of existing literature with primary data collection through interviews. There will be a series of interviews conducted to professionals in the commercial area that work in the Freight Forwarding Industry and have experience in the subject. There will also be interviews with clients that have faced issues with their Freight Forwarders to explore their point of view on this matter.

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1. Introduction

In recent years, the global business environment has become increasingly unpredictable. Events such as the COVID-19 pandemic, the Suez Canal blockage, and the ILA Strikes at U.S. ports have created widespread disruptions with a domino effect across international trade. These crises highlight the fragile nature of global supply chains and the importance of strategic client management in turbulent times. Attracting new clients is important for any organization, however retaining clients is even more important nowadays as losing a good client can lead to very high costs. Many businesses are profitable based solely on a few very good customers. In times of market crisis provoked by wars, natural disasters, pandemics or strikes it is crucial to maintain a good relationship with the customers as both customers and businesses are being affected and they need to work together so they can overcome difficulties and reach their goals. On times of uncertainty if the client thinks he is not being well treated or that the company is not managing well the crisis situation and is not giving the proper attention to the client then he might feel inclined to strategize and change suppliers. This change may not have immediate effects but after a certain time has passed and the crisis situation has stabilized then it might be the right time to make this change happen.

Freight Forwarding companies play an important role in any business especially those that move big volumes on an international scale by offering a range of services including export and import support, shipping advice, packaging and other logistics services. They work with various carriers on behalf of their clients and are essential for companies involved in global trade. Companies in the freight forwarding sector are currently struggling with challenges in the uncertain business climate. Declining revenue from ocean and air freight has had a profound impact on even the most prosperous firms in the field. The demise of numerous carriers has complicated the task of securing financial backing, given the presence of numerous unpaid creditors. As a result, cargo support schemes are exercising greater caution in their dealings with stakeholders. Furthermore, carriers that have assumed the cargo of failed carriers are also contending with financial difficulties, which has made it challenging for them to settle their bills. Although the majority of cargo eventually reaches its destination, some high-value, oversized, and time-sensitive shipments are being left behind. (Bartle et al., 2021)

The services provided by Freight Forwarders are a big part of any business however as mediators on the operations of international transport they are subjected to a high degree of volatility as they are dependent on external factors which makes it hard to manage the volatility of the market and at the same time provide a reliable and stable service to the client. Providing adaptable logistics solutions that bridge the gap between production and consumption has elevated the significance of this sector. The imperative to streamline efficiency and cost-effectiveness, coupled with the inevitable globalization of markets, has transformed the role of freight forwarders. They have evolved into adept transport managers who oversee various intermodal expressions of transport processes and all related operations, thereby contributing to the intricate supply chain management of organizations. The freight forwarding industry is globally renowned for its pivotal influence on international trade and national economies, making it a highly sought-after sector. However, it is essential to acknowledge that this industry is profoundly cyclical and closely intertwined with market dynamics. Moreover, the presence of in-house or external freight forwarding service providers has long impacted the market landscape, necessitating a comprehensive strategic market analysis. (Apostolopoulos, 2024)

This industry is heavily reliant on a strong global economy and may suffer during a crisis, but there is still a need for their services even in challenging times. This could be an opportunity for freight forwarders to rethink their business strategies. Most sought after strategy for businesses is to generate new ideas or provide a range of products or services. Being innovative and offering a variety of options are seen as important decisions for a company to be able to adjust to changes. They also play a crucial role in maintaining a company's operations. Diversifying is often seen as a smart move that helps to lower risks by combining different elements that reduce the impact of a crisis on the company. Having a range of products or services helps to spread out the demand and cater to different customer groups, so if one area is struggling, the company can still make money from another. Many companies benefit from having a wider range of businesses and services compared to their less diversified competitors, even in times of economic hardship like a crisis. (Shao et al.2020)

In an industry as dynamic and interconnected as freight forwarding, the ability to maintain strong client relationships during times of crisis is not just a competitive advantage—it is essential for survival. By investigating how commercial teams navigate volatile market conditions and how clients respond to different approaches, this study seeks to illuminate the strategies that truly make a difference. The insights generated will not only contribute to academic understanding of client retention under uncertainty but also provide practical guidance for freight forwarders striving to enhance resilience, foster trust, and sustain growth in an unpredictable global landscape.

To achieve this, Chapter 2 will review existing literature on client retention strategies, crisis management, and freight forwarding industry volatility, establishing the theoretical foundation for this study. Chapter 3 will outline the mixed-methods research design, including data collection through interviews with industry professionals and clients. Chapter 4 will present the findings and analysis, highlighting successful and unsuccessful approaches in client management during crises. Finally, Chapter 5 will discuss implications for practice, propose recommendations for freight forwarders, and identify directions for future research.

While much of the existing literature focuses on operational and financial strategies for crisis mitigation, this thesis conceives that the most critical and sustainable form of resilience is relational. It is at the commercial interface—where communication occurs, solutions are crafted, and partnerships are tested—that client loyalty is either irrevocably broken or forged into a significant competitive advantage. Ultimately, this thesis argues that the future resilience of freight forwarders lies not in weathering crises alone, but in turning them into opportunities to strengthen client trust and loyalty.

2. Literature Review

This chapter presents a comprehensive overview of the key themes pertinent to this research, alongside a synthesis of existing knowledge that forms the foundation of the study. The initial section examines market crises within the freight forwarding industry, analysing various types of crises and their impacts on the sector. The subsequent section delves into the volatility and risks inherent in the freight forwarding industry, exploring the concept and its broader implications. Following this, the chapter provides an in-depth exploration of crisis management, emphasizing its significance and the complexities involved. Finally, the chapter concludes by outlining strategies for mitigating crises, addressing general approaches and a commercial perspective. Each section will not only summarize the current state of knowledge but also critically engage with it to identify the specific gaps in the literature that this research aims to fill.

2.1 Market Crises in the Freight Forwarding Industry

Market crises are intricate events that involve several factors. For many people, a market crisis is essentially the same as a financial crisis, whether it involves a collapse of exchange rates or a stock market crash, panics. Crises can arise from political structures, public institutions, and even from cultural and religious reasons (Bookchin, 2022). In the business world, conversations often focus on a "crisis" when things become uncertain and risky. Crises can appear in different forms, like when a company can't meet its responsibilities. Even shipping companies might face challenges during unstable markets.

Economic recessions often trigger widespread market crises in the freight forwarding industry. During periods of economic instability, consumer demand for goods typically declines, leading to reduced shipping volumes. Freight forwarders face diminished revenue streams as shipping lanes experience decreased activity and container utilization drops. For instance, the 2008 global financial crisis caused a sharp contraction in trade, leaving freight forwarders to navigate empty shipping containers and excess capacity, further intensifying competitive pressures (Notteboom et al., 2021).

Geopolitical conflicts, trade wars, and shifting regulatory landscapes also pose significant challenges to freight forwarders. Tariff impositions, economic sanctions, and border closures disrupt established trade routes and force companies to seek alternative solutions, often at higher costs. The U.S.-China trade war, for example, introduced uncertainty and additional costs to supply chains, compelling freight forwarders to adapt by rerouting shipments or negotiating new agreements with clients and carriers (Bown, 2020).

Natural disasters and other supply chain disruptions can trigger crises that ripple through the freight forwarding sector. Hurricanes, earthquakes, and pandemics like COVID-19 have underscored the fragility of global logistics networks. During the pandemic, lockdowns, port closures, and labor shortages caused severe delays in freight movement, leaving forwarders grappling with unprecedented challenges in meeting client demands. The shortage of shipping containers and skyrocketing freight rates during this period further highlighted the industry's vulnerability to unexpected shocks (UNCTAD, 2021).

Being prepared and adaptable is important when tough times come, especially in the freight forwarding industry. It's helpful to look into how different business strategies and organizational traits can help handle crises, as they have similar structures and ways of operating (Shi et al., 2023). Early identification of potential crises is crucial to an analytical approach in order to gain a deeper understanding and to proactively prevent future economic downturns. Analysing past economic crises offers valuable knowledge and insights. Stakeholders such as management, policyholders, individuals, citizens, and political parties are all deeply interested in gaining insights that can help mitigate economic hardships.

The literature effectively categorizes these crises and their operational impacts, providing the essential context for this study's primary research question: How do commercial teams adapt their strategies to these specific types of disruptions to retain clients? While existing research describes the what (the crisis), it is less clear on the how (the commercial response). A critical gap exists in understanding how the industry is shifting from managing discrete, singular crises to navigating a state of multi crisis or perpetual uncertainty—a theme this research will explore through direct interviews with industry professionals and their clients.

2.2 The Volatility and Risks in the Freight Forwarding Industry

A characteristic of the global freight industry is volatility and risk. Large corporations are aware of these factors but are poorly equipped to monitor, manage, and understand volatility, especially those unique to the freight sector, which impact their balance sheets through moving goods to market. Analysts are not equipped with detailed, in-depth freight industry experience nor are they given the luxury of time to comprehend how the complexity of elements that impact a forwarder's performance, balance sheet health, and insurance needs have interacted, are interacting, or are forecast to impact a given timetable of projected events (Bai et al., 2022).

In academic discussions about risk, volatility is often characterized as unforeseeable events without a clear cause. In the context of logistics and transportation, volatility pertains to carriers experiencing significant and uncontrollable fluctuations in the prices of goods they buy or sell. It also includes any time-related changes that impact a forwarder's circumstances. This literature emphasizes that these changes usually involve shifts in prices, variations in supply and demand, and disturbances within a forwarder's supply chain. Fluctuations in the transportation and logistics industry are often influenced by geopolitical factors, such as international tensions and conflicts, which can impact key transit zones. This brings freight forwarders and their carriers into the equation, as transportation routes intersect continents and make ports essential but also a common point of disruption. Additionally, factors like globalization, the digital revolution, the rise of emerging markets, and e-commerce and omni-channel retailing contribute to these variations. Understanding these factors is crucial for anticipating future developments. Importantly, unnecessary volatility in transportation and logistics can lead to an increase in high-risk orders and have negative consequences for a forwarder's reputation if not addressed professionally (Shi et al., 2023).

The freight forwarding industry is associated with various types of risk. This examination focuses on these risks from the perspective of a freight forwarder, defined as an agent arranging freight and customs clearance for the person who hired them, as well as having some control over the freight. The categorization of risks points to the different forms of risk that can arise when a freight forwarder relies on its agents. This includes operational risk, where misconduct by a proxy is planned in advance. Mismanagement, default, or fraud are all measurable sources of operational risk in any business. Moreover, when a forwarder depends on a proxy, the activities, rules, and regulations of the proxy's local environment can have further implications for the forwarding agent. These sources suggest that risk can be internal, external, physical, financial, or a combination of these characteristics. This paper does not aim to provide an exhaustive list of risk types. In conclusion, the most effective risk assessment tool should be complemented with other tools for risk prioritization and risk treatment, while also being supported by the creation of a risk-aware culture (Barbieri et al., 2021).

In order to understand the extent of volatility in the logistics industry, it is important to identify the various factors contributing to it. These factors can be divided into economic and administrative categories. The cost of transportation is influenced by numerous factors, including fuel prices, which have seen significant fluctuations in recent years, with steady increases from mid-2016 to mid-2018 after a sharp drop (Xiuzhen et al., 2022).

Fluctuations in currency exchange rates are another example of how economic shifts can manifest as oscillations in logistics. Domestic carriers and export-import trading operations also pay high fixed costs, so they too must pass increased expenses onto their customers. Changes to and inconsistencies within the international regulatory landscape also influence operational dynamics. Changes in the rules laid out by international law contribute further unpredictability. There is no single solution to this issue, as every factor has some impact on all aspects of operations. Instead, it is important for freight forwarders to identify the factors that they can manage and create a reliable strategy with the lowest possible cost. Some of the most significant factors contributing to these issues include global trends, increased reliance on imports, and the growth of e-commerce. Identifying the causes of uncertainty involves studying the associated elements directly (Vochozka et al., 2020).

Authors like Bai et al. (2022) and Shi et al. (2023) correctly identify volatility as a core characteristic of the industry. This foundation is crucial for investigating this study's goal of ascertaining effective retention techniques. However, much of this literature frames volatility as a factor to be managed within existing commercial frameworks, such as long-term, fixed-rate contracts. A key point of critical inquiry for this thesis is whether these traditional frameworks remain viable in the face of modern, overlapping crises. This research will challenge this assumption by examining, through firsthand accounts, whether the nature of perpetual volatility has rendered such agreements obsolete, forcing a fundamental shift in the commercial relationship itself.

2.3 Understanding Crisis Management

Crisis management in organizations is becoming an essential and integrated part of organizational processes that command attention and investment of resources. In order for organizations to understand how to manage customer relations during a crisis, they must first be equipped to understand the process of identifying potential crises, as well as matching response policy in a way that is clear to members of an organization. Good ways to identify useful response systems to some potential crises include considering the methods by which organizations approach risky decision-making and the role of chance in altering destinations to remind us about the potential benefits and costs of planning expenses (Al - Dabbagh, 2020).

Crisis management is a learning process for future crises. In other words, individuals learn accurate information during a crisis to apply to the next one, should it occur. To determine accurately the consequences of an untoward event, various states of the world are recognized and organized into scenario-based communication responses. This organizational overview of crisis management covers some of the key ideas of characteristic phases to be recognized in the crisis management process, as well as the importance of managers and public relations practitioners having educated, expert judgment for effective decision-making in reactive stages of the crisis management process. As these crises escalate, the constraints on decision-makers mount because they must also arrive at correct, adequate, and timely intervention responses for future crises, which is a subset of customer relation problems that typically occur in the initial stages of a crisis. These responses are represented as a decision tree technique to provide assistance to managers during a crisis who face complex decision communication scenarios. By incorporating academic literature with practitioner competencies, the results should bring together a multidisciplinary approach and a checklist for crisis communication experts to learn from when reviewing current internal and external communication plans (Al - Dabbagh, 2020).

Approaches to minimize impacts and promote recuperation following a crisis involve a wide array of policy choices aimed at preventing a financial or economic market crisis from escalating. Addressing the root causes of a crisis, such as increasing inequality, through redistributive actions incorporated into corporate and financial regulations can help prevent and aid in recovery from a crisis. Directing aid to affected individuals and organizations, as well as implementing policies to stimulate economic growth once recovery is underway, are also crucial. Collaborative efforts with other governments and international organizations are necessary to address crises that transcend borders or affected interconnected markets. Evidence-based crisis management is essential to avoid futile spending and the waste of time and resources. It is equally important for policymakers to take into account historical cases to identify effective recovery measures. Learning from past crises can better equip policymakers to implement successful recovery measures in future crises (Bookchin, 2022).

The diversification of supply chains is a valuable strategy for companies to quickly adapt to unforeseen market shifts. Investing in technology and processes that foster responsiveness is crucial, and if this is not feasible, establishing strong risk management measures is essential. Collaborating with various parties and acting as a key customer or supplier can bolster these strategies. Another effective approach is to invest in market analysis and horizon scanning capabilities, which serves as a form of continuous risk management to assess potential market disruptions. It is imperative to constantly evaluate market risks. Conventional methods for managing risk and newer, more innovative approaches have been created to identify, evaluate, and reduce the risks caused by volatility and crises. Scenario planning and stress testing models have been used to assess the potential impacts of future crises. The goal is to evaluate the effects of risk and make early decisions to address the main contributors to risk. This method is valuable in providing more informed and quantified results on the expected financial impacts, and in identifying the need for a specific approach for the company after discussing potential crisis scenarios (Horobet et al., 2022).

The established literature on crisis management provides robust theoretical models focusing on identification, response, and learning. These models are essential for understanding the organizational backdrop against which commercial decisions are made. However, they often adopt a top-down, corporate perspective. This study seeks to fill a notable gap by focusing on the micro-level, specifically the commercial and client-facing aspects of crisis management. It aims to move beyond general policy choices to investigate the specific communication tactics, relationship-building efforts, and solution-oriented approaches that define successful (and unsuccessful) client retention strategies from the perspectives of both the account manager and the client.

2.4 Strategies for mitigating crisis

Financial Management:

Organizations must ensure the availability of funds and improve cash flow through proactive measures. This includes establishing clear payment terms with customers and monitoring accounts payable within credit limits. Enhancing financial and operational systems through cost-efficient methods and compliance initiatives is crucial. Additionally, implementing a cash reserve policy can better prepare organizations to withstand crises or business interruptions.

Technology Adoption:

Embracing digital tools and ERP systems can enhance operational efficiency and compliance in shorter timeframes. Innovative logistics solutions, such as advanced digital platforms, can drive technology-enabled efficiencies like trade predictability, terminal slot booking, and trade price discovery.

Collaboration and Partnerships:

Forwarders should focus on strengthening existing relationships and forging new collaborations with shipping lines to secure financial stability and recovery. For shipping lines, active engagement and support for stakeholders are essential to mitigate network risks and maintain uninterrupted operations.

Diversify Service Portfolio:

While a focused strategy aids survival, over-reliance on limited offerings can be risky. Diversifying service offerings can reduce operational risks and provide resilience against market shocks.

Employee Training and Skill Development:

Organizations should plan training and skill development for manual operational staff, particularly for those unfamiliar with technology, to enhance their adaptability and efficiency.

Strategic Foresight:

Strong leadership is needed to formulate strategies with a long-term focus on value creation. Organizations should identify opportunities within crises, such as launching new products, entering unexplored markets, and leveraging resources to adopt new technologies.

(Wieczorek-Kosmala, 2022)

According to industry standards, businesses are advised to adopt a new approach in identifying and adding extra services to their existing vendor base. This approach should take into account various product types, including imports, exports, customs brokerage, and different modes of transportation such as ocean, air, land, and express options. It is recommended that commercial practices be improved to include comparisons of import/export service distribution, spot or volume rate concentration, ocean and air import/export, LCL/FCL ratios, and small shipment activity. Companies should also analyze if their revenues align with the profiles of their shipment/live load activity. There are many opportunities available for companies to diversify their service portfolios, especially in export-import customers, related business services, and associated sales. It may be necessary to gather more data to identify high-volume services that are most important to customers. By focusing on different service metrics, companies can improve their relationships with customers and increase mutual customer margins. It is important for companies to encourage departmental transfers and rotational assignments, as well as foster open communication and better customer relationships. Many tasks are routine in nature and can easily be consolidated if role specialty conflicts are resolved. With advances in technology, such as personal identification and electronic in-basket access, companies can secure their operations (Margherita & Heikkilä, 2021).

The strategies outlined by Wieczorek-Kosmala (2022) and Margherita & Heikkilä (2021) represent a comprehensive overview of established best practices. This literature provides the baseline against which this study will compare its empirical findings. The central question this research addresses is: Which of these theoretical strategies are actually prioritized and proven effective in practice during a crisis, and are there emergent strategies not yet captured in the literature? For instance, while "Collaboration and Partnerships" is mentioned, the literature does not fully explore the nuanced shift from a transactional vendor relationship to a deep, strategic partnership, which this study's interviews will illuminate.

2.4.1 The Commercial Approach and the Identified Research Gap

In the diverse freight forwarding industry, many carriers and forwarders see opportunities for additional services and a greater emphasis on end-to-end solutions with supply chain visibility and management capabilities. Forward-thinking operators have recognized this trend and have been rebranding their businesses as 360 or 4PL services. By 360, we mean providing services not only within the traditional boundaries of freight forwarding, but also in areas like road, rail, and warehousing (Notteboom et al., 2021).

The existing integrators in the logistics industry are responding to trends in an interesting way. Some have reduced or stopped certain services, but now they're refocusing and expanding by forming partnerships, acquiring specialist operators, or growing their services organically. They're aiming to compete in the 4PL environment, using their competitive advantage. High-level supply chain systems can handle cargo through ocean or air modes, customs clearance, and last-mile delivery, which are essential 4PL services (Cichosz et al., 2020).

The commercial perspective offered by the literature highlights a trend towards integrated solutions and the critical importance of trust. This underscores that the commercial relationship is the nexus where crisis impacts are felt most acutely and where retention is ultimately won or lost. However, while the literature acknowledges the importance of trust (Cichosz et al., 2020), it provides limited empirical insight into how that trust is built and maintained by commercial teams amidst the operational chaos and contractual breakdowns that define modern crises.

In any business, establishing and maintaining customer trust and loyalty is crucial. However, since trust is not easily quantifiable and its evaluation is subjective, many professional organizations overlook the development and reinforcement of uniform guidelines for all employees. The higher the volume of services, the greater the likelihood of problems, errors, and disputes arising. A key takeaway is that the level of trust can and should be enhanced in order to improve overall business efficiency. The foundation of a trustworthy corporate system lies in a well-coordinated and well-trained team that possesses a deep understanding of the boundaries under which employees operate in a supportive environment at all levels (Cichosz et al., 2020).

Therefore, a clear gap exists in the literature: a lack of in-depth, qualitative research from both the forwarder and client perspectives on the specific commercial strategies that are effective in an environment of perpetual uncertainty. This thesis aims to address this gap by exploring the real-world techniques, successes, and failures in client retention, moving beyond theoretical models to provide a practical understanding of the commercial approach in today's volatile freight forwarding industry.

3. Methodology

This chapter begins by outlining the methodological approaches used in related studies discussed in the previous chapter. It then introduces the methodology selected for the investigation, detailing the interview sample and the specific measures used to gather information effectively.

3.1 Methodological Aspects of Relevant Studies

The reviewed studies collectively address resilience, sustainability, and risk management across industries such as shipping, aviation, logistics, and tourism, using diverse methodologies and data sources.

Several studies employ econometric modeling to analyze financial impacts, such as Horobet et al. (2022), who examine oil price volatility on airline stock returns, and Xiuzhen et al. (2022), who model fluctuations in oil prices. These studies rely on historical financial data and use time-series analysis.

Case study and framework analysis are common methods for examining industry-specific responses to crises. Bartle et al. (2021) analyzes sustainability practices in air freight, while Notteboom et al. (2021) compare container shipping resilience during the COVID-19 pandemic and the 2008–2009 financial crisis. These studies use secondary data and comparative metrics to identify lessons learned and resilience strategies.

Qualitative approaches, such as grounded theory and philosophical critique, explore broader themes. Al-Dabbagh (2020) uses interviews to study decision-making during the COVID-19 pandemic, while Bookchin (2022) critiques societal and ecological systems, providing theoretical insights.

Policy and scenario analyses are used to understand broader trends, such as Bown (2020), who analyzes US-China trade conflicts, and UNCTAD (2021), which evaluates the impact of COVID-19 on maritime transport. These studies often draw on official reports and global trade data, employing trend and comparative analyses.

For specific industries, such as tourism, Wieczorek-Kosmala (2022) studies financial resilience using industry reports, while Cichosz et al. (2020) explore digital transformation in logistics service providers through mixed methods, including surveys and case studies.

Overall, the studies highlight diverse data retrieval methods, such as historical datasets, surveys, interviews, and secondary data from reports, tailored to their industries and research questions. Data analysis techniques range from statistical and econometric modeling to theoretical critique and qualitative comparison, offering a comprehensive view of resilience and sustainability across global industries.

Table 1 offers a concise summary of the methodologies applied across these studies.

Table 1. Studies Methodology

Study	Methodology	Country of Study	Industry	Data Retrieval	Data Analysis
Shi et al. (2023)	Case study, theoretical modeling	Global	Container shipping	Secondary data from industry reports	Quantitative modeling
Bookchin (2022)	Philosophical, theoretical analysis	Broad societal context	Societal and ecological systems	Not applicable (conceptual)	Theoretical critique
Horobet et al. (2022)	Econometric modeling	Global	Airlines	Historical stock and oil price data	Time-series econometrics
Bartle et al. (2021)	Case studies, sustainability analysis	Global	Air freight transportation	Secondary data, industry case studies	Comparative sustainability metrics
Apostolopoulos (2024)	Comparative analysis	Not specified	Shipping	Surveys, secondary data	Qualitative comparison
Shao et al. (2020)	Portfolio theory application	Global	Corporate risk	Financial performance data	Portfolio diversification metrics
Bown (2020)	Policy analysis	US-China trade relations	Trade policy	Tariff lists, WTO case records	Comparative policy impact assessment
UNCTAD (2021)	Policy analysis	Global	Maritime transport	Reports, global trade databases	Trend and impact analysis
Bai et al. (2022)	Empirical study	Global	Tramp shipping	Financial and operational data	Quantitative analysis
Barbieri et al. (2021)	Survey-based study	10 countries	Mobility	Surveys across transport modes	Perceived risk statistical analysis
Xiuzhen et al. (2022)	Econometric modeling	Global	Oil resources, economic recovery	Oil price data	Volatility modeling
Vochozka et al. (2020)	Econometric analysis	Global	Currency exchange	Oil prices, EUR/USD exchange rate	Statistical correlation analysis
Al-Dabbagh (2020)	Qualitative, grounded theory	COVID-19 global focus	Crisis management	Interviews	Grounded theory approach
Wieczorek-Kosmala (2022)	Case studies, resilience analysis	Tourism-focused regions	Tourism	Industry reports, financial data	Financial resilience metrics
Margherita & Heikkilä (2021)	Framework analysis	Global	Business continuity	Case studies of world-leading companies	Framework development
Notteboom et al. (2021)	Comparative analysis	Global	Container shipping	Data from ports	Historical impact comparison
Cichosz et al. (2020)	Mixed methods	Global	Logistics service providers	Surveys, case studies	Digital transformation success factors

3.2 Methodological Selection

The methodology for this study combines a thorough review of existing literature with primary data collection through semi-structured interviews. This strategy is designed to offer a comprehensive exploration of the research topic by grounding it in established theory while also capturing the real-world perspectives of subject matter experts.

While quantitative methods could measure the frequency or scale of crisis impacts, a qualitative approach was deemed most suitable for achieving this study's specific research goals. The primary objective is to explore the nuances of commercial strategies, client relationships, and decision-making processes during volatile periods—areas where context and perception are paramount. A qualitative methodology, specifically through in-depth interviews, allows for the exploration of the "why" and "how" behind the actions of commercial teams and their clients, providing the "deeper insights" that quantitative data alone cannot capture.

The primary data for this study was collected through 15 semi-structured interviews conducted with two key groups: 10 subject matter experts (SMEs) from the freight forwarding industry and 5 clients. This dual approach was chosen to ensure a comprehensive understanding of both the industry's internal strategies and external customer experiences during market disruptions. The SMEs selected possess a significant depth of experience, ranging from five to over thirty years in the sector, with the majority having at least ten years of experience. This ensures the insights are grounded in extensive, practical knowledge. The client participants all represent large, multinational corporations, providing a strategic perspective from major global shippers who are critically dependent on their logistics partners.

The semi-structured interviews with SMEs were designed to capture in-depth insights into how freight forwarding companies adapt their commercial approaches during crises. The flexibility of this format allowed experts to elaborate on their unique strategies and experiences, revealing critical factors that influence commercial decision-making during volatile periods.

Simultaneously, interviews with clients were conducted to gather an external perspective. This group included businesses that rely on freight forwarders for supply chain continuity and were directly affected by disruptions. The questions explored their experiences, challenges, satisfaction levels, and expectations from freight forwarders during crises. By including client perspectives, the study aims to identify gaps in service delivery and areas for improvement, offering a balanced view of industry performance.

Combining the perspectives of SMEs and clients provides a comprehensive understanding of the freight forwarding industry's response to crises. While SMEs offer insights into internal strategies and operational adjustments, clients highlight the practical implications of these measures and areas where expectations were unmet. This dual-method approach enriches the study by revealing both the efficacy of commercial strategies and their real-world impact, offering actionable recommendations for the industry.

Table 2 provides the Planned Timetable used for this Study.

Task	Oct-24	Nov-24	Dec-24	Jan-25	Feb-25	Mar-25	Apr-25	May-25	Jun-25	Jul-25	Aug-25	Sep-25
Literature Revision												
Interview Development												
Interview Data Retrieval												
Data Analysis												
Results & Comparison												
Finalization												
Conclusion & Formatting												

3.3 Measures Definition and Analysis method

In this study, data collected from the semi-structured interviews with subject matter experts (SMEs) and clients will be analyzed through qualitative methods, such as thematic analysis. This involves coding the interview transcripts to identify common themes and patterns related to the commercial strategies used during market crises in the freight forwarding industry.

The responses will be transcribed, and key concepts, terms, and strategies will be coded. These codes will be organized into themes reflecting the interviewees' experiences and insights. Thematic analysis will help categorize the data and make sense of complex responses. It will allow the identification of patterns related to market disruptions, crisis management, and client expectations.

The data from the interviews will then be compared with the findings from the literature review, which includes previous studies on similar themes. This comparison will highlight where the interview data aligns with or deviates from established theories or practices studied above, providing a broader perspective on the topic.

By synthesizing the findings from both the interviews and the literature, conclusions will be drawn about the current commercial approaches used by freight forwarders during market crises. The study will identify gaps or inconsistencies in the existing practices, especially from the client's perspective, and suggest areas where improvements can be made. This process will lead to actionable insights that can help inform both industry practices and future research.

Following a step-by-step process, the analysis will proceed in these sequential steps:

Familiarization with the Data: This involves multiple readings of the transcribed interviews to gain a comprehensive understanding of their content and context.

Initial Coding: Meaningful units of text from the transcripts will be identified and assigned descriptive labels or "codes." These codes represent the initial ideas, concepts, or experiences expressed by the interviewees. This step is crucial for organizing the data systematically.

Grouping into Thematic Categories: The initial codes will then be organized into broader thematic categories. These categories will reflect the main areas of the study and directly address the research questions.

Interpretation of Emergent Patterns: The final step involves analyzing the thematic categories to identify overarching patterns, relationships, and significant implications. This interpretation will directly address the research questions and contribute to a deeper understanding of commercial approaches during market crises in the freight forwarding industry.

3.4 Profile of Interview Participants

To ensure the credibility and depth of the empirical data, this study employed a purposive sampling strategy targeting two distinct yet complementary participant groups: seasoned Subject Matter Experts (SMEs) from within the freight forwarding industry and strategic Client Representatives from major multinational corporations. This dual-perspective approach was a deliberate methodological choice designed to capture a holistic and triangulated view of commercial strategies during market crises. By juxtaposing the internal perspectives of service providers with the external experiences of their strategic customers, the research is able to validate stated strategies against their real-world impact, thereby generating a more robust and nuanced analysis.

3.4.1 Subject Matter Experts (SMEs)

The first cohort consisted of ten subject matter experts, each possessing extensive professional experience within the freight forwarding sector. The selection criteria prioritized not only the length of service but also the breadth of experience across various commercial functions. The roles held by these participants encompass senior positions in sales, reginal or global account management and strategic leadership, ensuring that the collected data reflects a comprehensive understanding of the commercial interface.

A key strength of this sample group is the significant depth and range of their collective experience, which spans from five to over thirty years in the area. The majority of the SMEs have more than a decade of experience in the industry. This longitudinal expertise is a critical asset to the study, as it ensures the insights are not limited to recent events like the COVID-19 pandemic but are informed by a historical context that includes a variety of market crises, such as the 2008 global financial crisis and other major supply chain disruptions. This allows for a richer understanding of how commercial strategies have evolved in response to a changing landscape of risk and volatility.

3.4.2 Client Representatives

The second cohort comprised five client participants, selected based on their strategic roles within large, multinational corporations that are heavily reliant on global freight forwarding services. These individuals are not merely operational contacts but hold senior positions such as procurement managers and global logistics directors, responsible for overseeing complex, high-value global supply chains. Their inclusion was vital for providing an external, high-stakes perspective on the efficacy of the freight forwarders' commercial approaches.

The strategic nature of their roles means their perspective transcends day-to-day logistical co-ordination and is instead focused on broader concerns of business continuity, risk mitigation, and the strategic value of their logistics partners. Their feedback provides an essential counter-point to the SMEs' perspectives, allowing the research to assess the critical gap between a forwarder's intended strategy and the client's actual experience and perception of value during a crisis. This group's insights are therefore indispensable for answering the core research question regarding which commercial strategies are genuinely effective in retaining clients when supply chains are under duress.

The following table provides a consolidated overview of the participant profiles.

Table 3 - Profile of Study Participants

Participant Group	**Number of Participants**	**Key Characteristics**	**Experience Range**	**Strategic Importance to Study**
Subject Matter Experts (SMEs)	10	Roles spanning sales, key account management, procurement, and strategic leadership within the freight forwarding industry.	5 to 30+ years, with a majority exceeding 10 years of experience.	Provides internal, operational, and strategic perspectives on the design and implementation of commercial crisis response strategies.
Client Representatives	5	Senior roles (e.g., procurement managers, logistics directors) representing large, multinational corporations with complex global supply chains.	Average of 15 + experience in procurement	Offers an external, high-stakes perspective on service expectations, the perceived value of forwarder strategies, and their impact on business continuity.

3.5 Ethical Considerations

To ensure the integrity of the research and protect the participants, this study adhered to ethical guidelines. All participants were provided with a clear explanation of the study's purpose and procedures before the interviews commenced. Informed consent was obtained from each individual, confirming their voluntary participation and their agreement to be recorded. To protect the identities of the participants and their respective organizations, all data was anonymized. Interview transcripts were stripped of any personally identifiable information, and responses are presented in an aggregated and thematic manner to ensure confidentiality. All collected data, including audio recordings and transcripts, were stored securely and were used exclusively for the academic purposes of this dissertation.

4. Results and Discussion

This chapter presents and analyzes the empirical data collected through semi-structured interviews with ten freight forwarding professionals (Subject Matter Experts - SMEs) and five clients of Freight Forwarding Companies. The data was coded and organized into thematic categories to identify key patterns related to the commercial approach during market crises. The following table details the coding scheme, integrating perspectives from both Subject Matter Experts (SMEs) and Clients to reflect the dual approach of the methodology. The table includes main categories, subcategories, descriptions, and an illustrative quote from the participants as well as the number of mentions of that same subcategory. The findings are discussed in relation to the theoretical framework established in the Literature Review. The central aim is to elucidate the commercial strategies that enhance client retention and resilience in an industry increasingly defined by volatility and disruption.

Table 3 - Interview Coding Scheme

Main Category	Subcategory	Description	Illustrative Quote	Nr of Mentions (% of Total)
I. Nature and Impact of Market Crises	A. Diverse Crisis Types	Identification of various crises, from natural disasters and economic downturns to specific industry disruptions.	"Uncertainty... during especially the first days when let's say the incident is happening."	12 (13.2%)
	B. Impact on Client Relationships & Retention	How crises affect the relationships between freight forwarders and their clients, and strategies for client retention.	"You can take it. As an opportunity. Find great solutions and there's definitely will support the the relation and it will be at the end much stronger than before."	9 (9.9%)
II. Commercial Strategies for Crisis Mitigation & Retention	A. Communication & Transparency	The critical role of open, honest, and proactive communication in building and maintaining trust.	"It's communication. The solution is communication. Yeah, and. Keep the lines open at all the times."	11 (12.1%)
	B. Solution-Oriented Approach	Providing tangible solutions, alternatives, and operational flexibility during disruptions.	"Providing solution, yeah. Whatever this means."	14 (15.4%)
	C. Relationship Building & Trust	Emphasizing personal connections, empathy, and long-term partnerships.	"Be their partner. Take their inquiries serious."	7 (7.7%)
III. Role of Technology vs. Human Element	A. Technology as an Enabler/Tool	Digital platforms and tools that assist in managing crisis impacts.	"Track and tracing tools. Which can be also integrated to your ERP. I mean, as I mentioned, I'm doing the procurement and responsible globally for the procurement. I'm not	6 (6.6%)

Main Category	Subcategory	Description	Illustrative Quote	Nr of Mentions (% of Total)
			interested in getting cost and getting mails off every single cargo."	
	B. Limitations of Technology	Challenges and shortcomings of technology in crisis scenarios, often related to human input or integration.	"Because the shipping lines don't always update things as they should because they're not reliable."	6 (6.6%)
	C. Primacy of the Human Element ("People's Business")	The strong belief that human interaction, expertise, and decision-making remain paramount, especially during crises.	"At the end of the day. It's about communication and reliability."	11 (12.1%)
IV. Future Priorities for the Freight Forwarding Industry	A. Investment in People & Relationships	The need to invest in human capital, dedicated teams, and fostering stronger client relationships.	"Maybe they? To prepare plans, yeah, where you can on one hand have a bit of a buffer, but on the other hand, develop plans where can shift the work."	5 (5.5%)
	B. Strategic Preparedness	Developing robust plans, backup options, and a resilient supply chain approach.	"My suggestion is. To prepare plans, yeah, where you can on one hand have a bit of a buffer, but on the other hand, develop plans where can shift the work."	6 (6.6%)
	C. Technological Advancement (with human oversight)	The continuous integration of technology, but with a clear understanding of its supportive role to human expertise.	"I think that it's a combination, but. Absolutely. To communicate. Yeah, that that's on my my top of my list. And after that, maybe the people in a combination with technology, because I think that that will be more and more important."	4 (4.4%)

4.1 The Anatomy of Crisis: Redefining the Operational Landscape

The interviews reveal a fundamental shift in the operational context of the freight forwarding industry. Participants from both the forwarder and client sides describe an environment that has moved beyond occasional, discrete crises (e.g., the 2008 financial crisis, the 2010 Icelandic volcano eruption) to a state of near-constant disruption, or a state where multiple, often overlapping, challenges have become the new normal. This section establishes this context by analyzing how participants perceive and are impacted by market crises, demonstrating that the primary challenge is not any single event, but the pervasive uncertainty that now characterizes the global supply chain.

The core challenge, cited almost unanimously by participants, is the pervasive uncertainty and volatility that crises inject into the supply chain. This uncertainty manifests in multiple forms, including capacity shortages, extreme price fluctuations, and information gaps, making planning and execution profoundly difficult. As one SME with 37 years of experience stated, "Uncertainty and that during especially the first days when let's say the incident is happening. It's a tough time where we have find solutions". This sentiment is echoed by a client-side procurement manager, who identified the primary challenge during the COVID-19 pandemic as "the uncertainty, the volatility of the market. Information gaps, as all you can remember". This state of constant flux is perceived as a significant departure from the relative stability of the pre-pandemic era. Another SME noted the increased frequency of disruptions: "meanwhile, I mean, it's not that we have one crisis a year. I mean, actually, you have every month another thing you have to deal with". A client confirmed this perception, remarking, "every year there's like 2, 3, 4 crisis and it's really hard on everybody". This transition from a predictable, cyclical business environment to one of perpetual, unforeseen crises has rendered traditional commercial models, such as long-term, fixed-rate contracts, increasingly obsolete.

This finding empirically validates the literature's description of the industry's inherent volatility and risk, as highlighted by Bai et al. (2022) and Shi et al. (2023). However, our data extends their work by demonstrating that this volatility has evolved from a series of discrete, cyclical events into a constant state of "polycrisis." This suggests that traditional crisis management models, which focus on responding to singular events, may no longer be sufficient.

The breakdown of these established commercial norms is a critical finding. An SME explained that pre-COVID, the industry operated on "long term contracts," but during and after the pandemic, these agreements "were thrown to the trash" as a force majeure environment took hold. A client-side manager described the tangible impact of this shift, stating that during a crisis, "All our agreements are more or less no longer respected from one day to the other... we felt... we're basically fully lost control". This contractual unreliability forces a move towards more dynamic, spot-market-driven interactions, which, while necessary, creates immense instability for clients' budgeting and planning. Consequently, the true commercial challenge is not merely managing a single crisis but redesigning the entire commercial framework to function effectively amidst perpetual instability. This implies a strategic move away from price-centric agreements towards partnerships built on different value metrics, such as flexibility and resilience. This observation provides a practical, real-world example of the supply chain fragility that UNCTAD (2021) identified during the pandemic, showing how theoretical vulnerabilities translate into the collapse of established commercial practices.

Furthermore, the data strongly indicates that crises function as a "litmus test" for client-forwarder relationships. They are powerful catalysts that either solidify a partnership by demonstrating value beyond price or expose its transactional weaknesses, often leading to its dissolution. One SME articulated this duality with clarity, stating that a crisis is an "opportunity" to "find great solutions and there's definitely will support the relationship, and it will be at the end much stronger than before. Or in worst case you can fail completely". Another SME reinforced this, noting that during a crisis, one could "build an... even stronger relationship with the customer because at the end it's a situation in which you have to deal with... Or you could completely destroy it". This suggests that the commercial approach employed during a crisis has a disproportionately large impact on the long-term viability of the client relationship. This finding adds a crucial relational dimension to the crisis management process discussed by Al-Dabbagh (2020), suggesting that the outcome of a crisis is not just operational but deeply interpersonal, impacting long-term business viability in a way that general frameworks often overlook.

4.2 The Commercial Response: A Framework for Client Retention

This section forms the core of the thesis, detailing the commercial strategies that have proven effective for retaining clients in a crisis-laden environment. The analysis of the interview data reveals a clear and consistent framework for success. This framework pivots away from traditional, price-focused sales tactics towards a relationship-centric, solution-oriented approach where communication, partnership, and flexibility are paramount.

4.2.1 Communication as the Cornerstone of Crisis Management

Across all interviews, with near-unanimous consensus from both SMEs and clients, proactive, transparent, and reliable communication was identified as the single most critical factor for client retention during a crisis. It is the foundation upon which trust is maintained, and partnerships are preserved when operational stability falters.

From the freight forwarder perspective, communication is framed as the primary tool for managing client relationships through turmoil. One SME stated unequivocally, "It's communication.

The solution is communication. Yeah, and keep the lines open at all times". Another elaborated on the specific qualities clients seek: "in these tough times... What they are looking for is reliability, communication, transparency and a true partner for their business". This demonstrates an understanding that the commercial role shifts from selling services to managing expectations and providing clarity. This perspective is strongly validated by the clients interviewed. One client emphasized, "First of all, that is the most important and almost in bold letters is communication". Another highlighted the critical importance of speed and proactivity: "if the customer... Hears about the situation faster than the forwarder. That is very bad, so the forwarder should be more agile". The demand for transparency extends to all news, good or bad. A third client articulated this need for unvarnished truth: "Just tell me what's going on. Tell me the truth. Give me a heads up... Tell me the good, the bad and the ugly".

The consistent emphasis on proactive communication of all news, including negative developments, reveals a deeper function of communication during a crisis. The demand is not merely for logistical information but for a reduction of uncertainty and a demonstration of accountability. The data shows that "bad news" delivered proactively is consistently valued more highly than "no news" or, worse, false promises. As one client explained, "giving the bad news is also communication," and "hiding information doesn't make sense". This is confirmed by an SME who noted that "customers also really honor when we say we cannot handle it. We don't have a solution that is better than postponing and postponing and postponing and having no clear answer". This indicates that the function of communication in a crisis shifts from purely transactional updates to psychological reassurance. It signals to the client that the forwarder is aware, engaged, and in control of what can be controlled, even amidst chaos. The broader implication is that the commercial role in a crisis becomes one of an "uncertainty absorber." The forwarder's value lies in their ability to process a deluge of chaotic information and provide the client with a clear, honest assessment. This, in turn, empowers the client to make their own informed decisions regarding their supply chain, production, and customer commitments. The commercial professional, therefore, transitions from a salesperson to a vital risk management partner.
This finding strongly confirms the theoretical importance of communication in crisis management frameworks, as proposed by Al-Dabbagh (2020). However, our data extends this theory by demonstrating, from both SME and client perspectives, that the quality and timeliness of communication (proactivity, honesty) are valued more highly than the positive or negative nature of the information itself. This positions the commercial role not just as a communicator, but as a manager of uncertainty, a practical application that enriches the theoretical models.

4.2.2 From Service Provider to Strategic Partner

The intense pressures of market crises accelerate the evolution of the client-forwarder dynamic. The interviews show a clear trend away from transactional, price-based relationships towards strategic partnerships built on mutual trust, reliability, and a shared problem-solving ethos. Forwarders who successfully navigate this transition are far more likely to retain and even grow their business with key clients.

Clients explicitly articulate their preference for this partnership model. One procurement manager advises other businesses to "stick to our partner and I'm using the word partner. Yeah, the service provider". Another client explains the tangible benefits of this approach: "This is a cooperation, and if you have a good relationship and a good cooperation, it's also easier to get that hands on feeling and that you are being prioritized". This indicates a recognition that in a crisis, loyalty and a strong relationship can provide access to scarce resources that are unavailable to those who operate on a purely transactional basis. Successful SMEs have internalized this and view partnership-building as a long-term strategy that pays dividends during volatile periods. One account manager described his approach as looking at relationships "in a longer term. So mid to longer term so even 5 to 10 years," moving beyond the short-term focus of the RFQ cycle. At the core of this partnership is a fundamental shift towards a solution-oriented mindset. Clients are less interested in a forwarder's standard service portfolio and more interested in their ability to solve complex, unforeseen problems. As one client bluntly stated, "What I want is a solution. Person with solutions not who wants to make more sales". Another client echoed this, stating that the top priority for forwarders should be "providing solution, yeah. Whatever this means".

This shift has fundamentally redefined the concept of "value" in the commercial relationship. Before the constant state of crisis, value was heavily weighted towards price and cost savings. The interviews reveal that while cost remains a factor, its primacy has been usurped by metrics of resilience and reliability. Clients who previously might have switched providers for minor price differences now recognize the immense cost of a line-down situation or a failed delivery. As the client-side procurement manager noted, businesses that are purely opportunistic and "jump" between forwarders for small savings are at a significant disadvantage during crises. They prioritize forwarders who demonstrate accountability and a willingness to "fight for us in this challenging times". This means a forwarder who can secure scarce capacity—even at a premium price—or propose a viable alternative routing provides far more value than one who simply offers the lowest theoretical rate on a contract that ultimately cannot be honored. The implication for commercial strategy is profound: sales and account management teams must shift their value proposition from "we can save you X% on your freight spend" to "we can help guarantee your production line keeps running." This requires a much deeper engagement with the client's business. As one SME explained, "it is so important for us to know the business of the customer" to understand the true impact of a delay and to tailor solutions accordingly. The commercial role thus evolves from a service vendor to a strategic supply chain consultant.

This empirical evidence confirms the strategic importance of "Collaboration and Partnerships" as suggested by Wieczorek-Kosmala (2022) and builds upon the concept of trust discussed by Cichosz et al. (2020). Our data extends these ideas by showing how this partnership materializes in a crisis: through a tangible shift in the value proposition from cost-saving to ensuring business continuity. This is a practical application of the move towards 4PL or end-to-end solutions noted by Notteboom et al. (2021), where the forwarder's value is measured by its ability to secure the client's supply chain, not just its freight rates.

4.2.3 Strategic Flexibility: Adapting Pricing, Services, and Operations

In a volatile market, rigidity is a liability. The data shows that successful freight forwarders demonstrate a high degree of strategic flexibility, adapting their pricing models, service offerings, and operational approaches to meet the unique and rapidly changing challenges of a crisis. This adaptability is a key component of the solution-oriented mindset valued by clients.

Pricing becomes a dynamic and often transparently negotiated element. SMEs acknowledge that crises inevitably lead to rate increases, but they frame this not as opportunistic price gouging, but as a necessary measure to secure scarce capacity in a high-demand market. One SME recalled that during the Icelandic volcano crisis, they "could increase the rates to a very interesting level," which was essential to chartering aircraft for a key automotive client and keeping their production lines moving. Another described a strategy of maintaining a base contract rate but adding a clearly communicated "emergency freight add on," which provides a degree of transparency and predictability for the client even amidst volatility.

The ability to offer creative and alternative solutions is a hallmark of a flexible forwarder. This goes beyond simply switching carriers and often involves entirely different modes or complex routings. One account manager recalled arranging "a lot of alternative routes for the shipments" during the Suez Canal blockage. A more extreme example was provided by another SME, who recounted the experience of trucking critical automotive parts from Shanghai all the way to Belgium to circumvent port congestion and vessel shortages. Furthermore, flexibility extends to creating bespoke services tailored to specific crisis-induced needs. This can include setting up dedicated charter air services to guarantee capacity for high-value clients, as one participant described. It can also involve establishing dedicated control towers to provide enhanced visibility and management for a specific customer's entire crisis-affected supply chain. A dedicated control tower or centralized business center represents a significant strategic evolution in freight forwarding, functioning as a single, dedicated team that provides a holistic, "helicopter view" of a specific client's entire supply chain. This moves beyond the standard decentralized model, where different branches handle individual shipments, to offer a more integrated and proactive approach, which is invaluable during a crisis. Its primary value lies in providing centralized oversight and streamlined communication, acting as a single, reliable source of truth that proactively identifies potential disruptions and offers consolidated, accurate updates, thereby reducing chaos for the client. More than just a monitoring hub, a control tower is an empowered problem-solving unit with the authority to coordinate a multi-layered response, engaging all necessary stakeholders—from local operations to regional product teams—to secure alternative capacity and manage expectations with greater agility. Ultimately, this deep integration transforms the relationship from a transactional service into a strategic partnership. By developing an intimate, personalized understanding of the client's business, such as the financial importance of end-of-quarter shipments, the control tower team can prioritize and act in the client's best interest, building immense trust and long-term loyalty.

Another SME described a strategy of providing additional warehouse space or leveraging Free Trade Zones to help clients manage inventory and mitigate the impact of tariffs, allowing them to "decide on a shorter notice then and where the cargo goes... you have to pay that's similar to what I mentioned earlier regarding a bonded warehouse. This helps the customer to steer it a little bit". These actions demonstrate a willingness to move beyond a standard service menu and co-create solutions with the client, cementing the partnership. These findings provide concrete examples of the "adaptability" that Shi et al. (2023) identify as crucial for handling crises. The diversification of services and operational approaches aligns directly with the mitigation strategies proposed by Wieczorek-Kosmala (2022) and Margherita & Heikkilä (2021), demonstrating how these theoretical strategies are implemented in practice to maintain supply chain integrity.

4.3 The Human-Technology Nexus in Crisis Management

The interviews provide a nuanced perspective on the roles of human expertise and technology in the freight forwarding industry. While technology is recognized as an increasingly important enabler of efficiency and visibility, the data overwhelmingly indicates that the human factor—relationships, expertise, creative problem-solving, and communication—remains the decisive element in successfully navigating crises and retaining clients.

The primacy of people is a recurring mantra throughout the interviews. The phrase "people make the difference" was used explicitly and implicitly by participants from both sides. One SME summarized the consensus view: "From my experience so far, I would say communication, flexibility, human being. Like I said, people make the difference. There will be always key". This is not merely an internal belief; it is a quality highly valued by customers. A client-side logistics manager stated, "I just want to talk to a human being like me, and I think we all feel like that... human interaction, I think is critical". This highlights a fundamental need for personal connection and reassurance, especially during times of high stress and uncertainty.

Technology's role is primarily valued as a tool for providing data, visibility, and efficiency. Clients appreciate digital tools that give them direct access to information, such as "predictive ETA" platforms that offer a "life view of where cargo is at", and online portals that provide daily updates without clogging email inboxes. SMEs, in turn, see the value in "more automated messages" that can provide faster alerts to clients about deviations like delays or rollovers.

However, participants are keenly aware of technology's limitations. A significant concern is the reliability of the data. As one client pointed out, digital platforms are only as good as the information fed into them: "You're depending on human beings to input the data into these systems, and if they input it wrong. It's wrong". Another critical limitation is the lack of business context. A different client noted that while technology can provide data, it cannot understand its significance: "a report or an AI tool, they don't know my business. They don't know what is important for me or for us". This leads to a clear delineation of complementary, rather than competitive, roles for humans and technology in crisis management. Technology is best suited for information dissemination: tracking shipments, providing status updates, and reporting raw data. It answers the fundamental questions of "what" and "where." In contrast, humans are essential for information interpretation, contextualization, and reassurance. They answer the more critical questions of "so what?" and "now what?". For example, a system can report that a container has been delayed by five days. A human account manager, knowing the client's production schedule, can interpret that this delay will shut down a critical assembly line and can proactively begin developing alternative solutions.

As one SME aptly noted, a client "just wants the reassurance to speak to somebody else". This reassurance, born of trust and expertise, cannot be automated. The most effective commercial approach, therefore, is one that integrates both elements. It leverages technology to provide fast, accurate data, which frees up human account managers to focus on high-value activities: interpreting that data within the client's specific context, developing creative solutions, managing the relationship, and providing the essential human touch that builds lasting partnerships. This finding offers a nuanced counterpoint to the literature's strong emphasis on "Technology Adoption" (Wieczorek-Kosmala, 2022). While our data confirms that technology is a key tool, it suggests its role is primarily supportive rather than transformative in the context of client retention during a crisis. This extends the discussion by delineating complementary roles: technology for information dissemination and humans for interpretation, strategic action, and reassurance—a critical distinction not explicitly detailed in the reviewed literature.

4.4 Building Future Resilience: Strategic Imperatives for the Industry

The experience of recent, frequent, and overlapping crises has catalyzed a strategic shift within the supply chain community towards building greater resilience. The interviews indicate that both freight forwarders and their clients are moving away from a pure cost-optimization model and are now prioritizing strategies that create buffers, options, and flexibility to better withstand future shocks.

A key theme is the move from "Just-in-Time" to "Just-in-Case" logistics. The hyper-efficient, low-inventory models that dominated for decades have been exposed as fragile. An SME advocated for a fundamental change in mindset, suggesting the industry needs to build "buffer, the setup of the company... for people for operational stuff, but also for goods for spare parts," moving away from the lean "just in time scenario". This shift is being driven by clients themselves. A global logistics director confirmed this trend, noting that "many companies started to increase their inventories for both raw materials components and also for the finished goods... making their own warehousing" to generate agility and avoid being out of stock. For clients, a primary resilience strategy is the diversification of their forwarder portfolio through the implementation of active backup scenarios. This marks a significant change from past practices. As one category manager explained, the old model was to award 100% of a lane's volume to the most suitable supplier. The new strategy is to "prepare more backup scenarios" and "keep backups running so that they really can take over if needed," even if this approach is "more expensive in rates" and more complex to manage. The rationale is that having a secondary or tertiary partner who is already familiar with the business's volumes and requirements allows for a much faster and more effective pivot when the primary provider is compromised by a crisis, be it a port strike or a cyberattack.

This finding is a direct, practical manifestation of the risk management principles discussed in the literature. The move from "Just-in-Time" to "Just-in-Case" is a clear response to the heightened volatility described by Bai et al. (2022) and Shi et al. (2023). Furthermore, the client-driven strategy of diversifying the forwarder portfolio with active backups is a tangible application of the resilience strategies advocated by Horobet et al. (2022), who discuss the importance of scenario planning and stress testing.

Finally, there is a clear imperative from the client side for forwarders to exert more influence upstream and drive greater accountability from carriers. With contracts frequently being dishonored during crises, clients expect their forwarder partners to leverage their consolidated volume and relationships to protect their interests. As one client stated, forwarders have "better negotiation power with the shipping lines and they should somehow force shipping clients to stick to the agreements". The breakdown of this "trust circle" is seen as a major threat to supply chain stability, and clients view their forwarders as the key agents in restoring a degree of reliability and predictability to the carrier market. This places a new strategic demand on forwarders: their value is not just in executing shipments, but in actively managing and stabilizing their corner of the supply chain ecosystem. This introduces a new dimension to the "Collaboration and Partnerships" theme from Wieczorek-Kosmala (2022), extending the concept beyond the client-forwarder relationship to include the forwarder's responsibility in managing the broader supply chain ecosystem, a point not explicitly covered in the reviewed literature.

5. Conclusion

This final chapter synthesizes the key findings from the analysis of the interview data, bringing the research to its logical close. Guided by the primary purpose of exploring the commercial strategies used by freight forwarders to retain clients during market crises, this chapter begins by reiterating the study's main conclusions. It then discusses their managerial, commercial, and broader industry implications, and acknowledges the limitations of the study while providing recommendations for future research.

5.1 Synthesis of Key Findings

The research set out to explore the commercial strategies used by freight forwarders to retain clients during market crises. The analysis of the qualitative data has yielded several key findings that, taken together, illustrate a fundamental transformation in the industry's commercial approach, driven by a new reality of systemic and perpetual instability.

First, the operational context for freight forwarding has fundamentally shifted. The empirical data confirms that the industry has moved beyond managing occasional, discrete crises to navigating a state of perpetual and overlapping "multi-crisis". This environment of pervasive uncertainty, characterized by the volatility described in the literature , has rendered traditional commercial models based on long-term, fixed-rate contracts increasingly ineffective. The experiences of participants during the COVID-19 pandemic and the Suez Canal blockage align with academic analyses of these disruptions, which highlight the fragility of global logistics networks and the collapse of established commercial norms.

Second, in this volatile environment, proactive, transparent, and reliable communication has emerged as the single most critical factor for client retention. The role of communication transcends mere logistical updates; it serves as a vital tool for uncertainty reduction, expectation management, and the demonstration of accountability. This finding provides a powerful, real-world validation of theoretical crisis management frameworks that emphasize the importance of clear communication policies for organizational response. The consistent client demand for unvarnished truth—"the good, the bad and the ugly"—underscores that the quality and timeliness of communication are valued more highly than the positive or negative nature of the information itself.

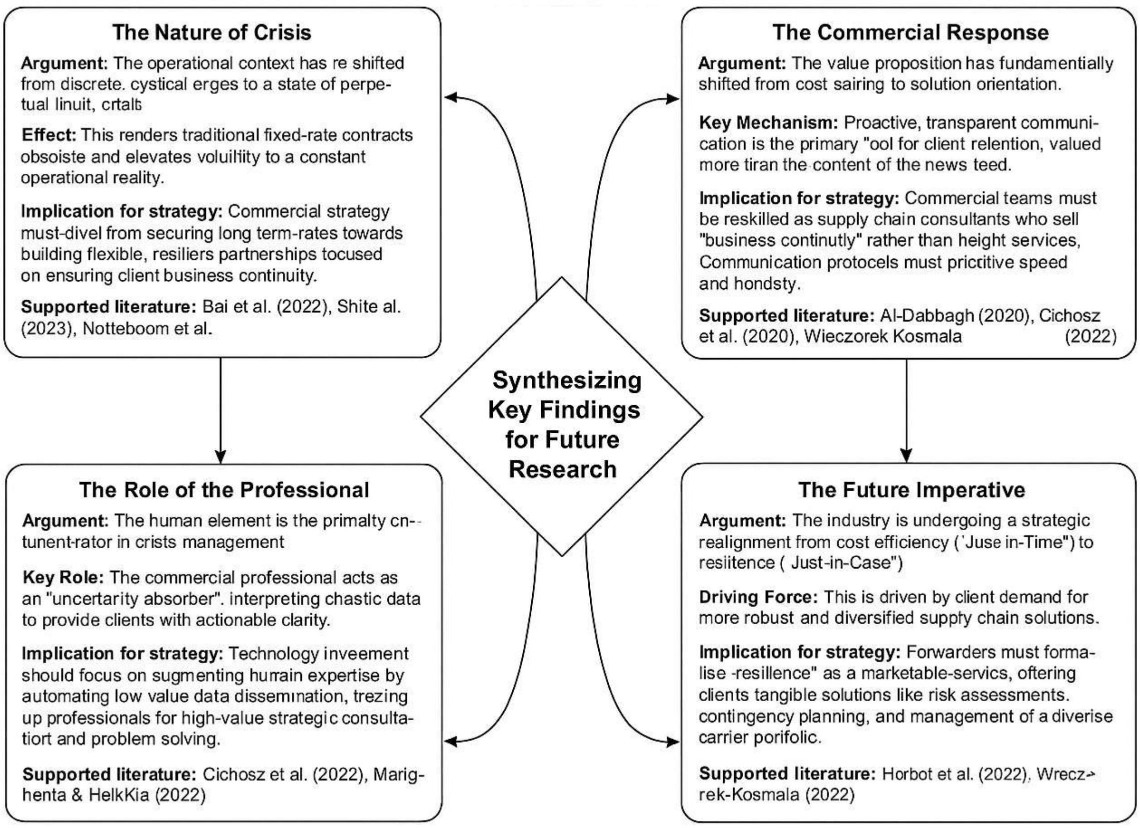
Third, crises act as a catalyst, accelerating the evolution of the client-forwarder relationship from a transactional exchange to a strategic partnership. The definition of value has tangibly shifted from a primary focus on price to a new emphasis on reliability, flexibility, and solution-orientation. This aligns with and extends the literature on the importance of trust and collaboration in logistics, showing how these abstract concepts materialize during a crisis. Clients are increasingly prioritizing forwarders who demonstrate a deep understanding of their business and act as problem-solvers, a trend that reflects the industry's move towards more integrated, 4PL-style service offerings.

Fourth, while technology plays a crucial enabling role in providing visibility and efficiency, the human factor remains the decisive element in crisis management and client retention. This presents a nuanced counterpoint to literature that heavily emphasizes technology adoption as a primary mitigation strategy. The data clearly delineates complementary roles: technology is best suited for information dissemination (e.g., tracking data), while humans are essential for information interpretation, contextualization, and the reassurance that builds and sustains trust. The most effective commercial approach is one that leverages technology to free up human capital for high-value relationship management and creative problem-solving.

Finally, the experience of recent disruptions has spurred a strategic imperative across the industry to build greater resilience. This is manifested in a client-driven shift from "just-in-time" to "just-in-case" inventory strategies, the implementation of active backup forwarder scenarios, and an increased demand for forwarders to enforce greater accountability from ocean and air carriers. This trend is a direct, practical application of the risk management principles and scenario planning discussed in the literature, signalling a broader strategic realignment in global supply chain management.

To extract these contributions and provide a clear framework for future inquiry, the following concept map synthesizes the core themes, their strategic implications, and the emergent avenues for further research.

Table 5: Concept Map of Key Findings for Future Research



Original Contribution to Knowledge

Beyond confirming existing theories, this thesis makes several original contributions to the field. A primary contribution is the provision of unique, dual-perspective empirical evidence on commercial strategies during an era of unprecedented multi-crises, capturing the voices of both freight forwarders and their clients. Furthermore, this thesis articulates a critical shift in the definition of value within the client-forwarder relationship, identifying a move away from price-centric metrics towards a new paradigm where reliability and solution-orientation are paramount. The research also conceptualizes a new role for the commercial professional as an "uncertainty absorber" , highlighting their function in processing chaotic information to provide clients with the clarity needed for strategic decision-making. It demonstrates that during a crisis, the primary function of the account manager is not merely to communicate information but to process, interpret, and contextualize chaotic data streams, thereby absorbing market volatility on behalf of the client and enabling them to make strategic decisions. Finally, this study contributes a nuanced understanding of the human-technology nexus in crisis management, delineating the complementary roles where technology is commoditized for data dissemination, while human expertise in interpretation, creative problem-solving, and reassurance becomes the primary source of differentiated value and client retention.

5.2 Managerial and Commercial Implications

The findings of this study have significant and actionable implications for commercial leaders and managers within the freight forwarding industry. To succeed in the current market, a strategic re-evaluation of the commercial function is necessary, moving it beyond a traditional sales role to that of a central pillar in the organization's resilience strategy.

Retrain and Reskill Commercial Teams: The consistent demand from clients for "solutions, not sales" necessitates a fundamental shift in the capabilities of commercial teams. Sales and account managers must be trained to evolve from price-based negotiators to solution-oriented consultants. This requires developing a deep, almost intimate, understanding of their clients' supply chains, production processes, and business risks. The value proposition must be reframed from "cost savings" to "business continuity and resilience." To support this, compensation and incentive structures should be reviewed to reward long-term client retention and partnership development, rather than focusing solely on short-term volume or margin gains.

Invest in Communication Infrastructure and Protocols: Given that communication was identified as the cornerstone of crisis management, companies must invest in the tools and processes that facilitate proactive, transparent, and multi-channel communication. This includes not only customer-facing visibility platforms but also robust internal communication protocols to ensure that commercial teams receive timely and accurate information from operations and product teams during a crisis. Clear guidelines should be established for communicating bad news promptly and managing client expectations honestly.

Embrace and Institutionalize Flexibility: In a volatile market, rigidity is a significant liability. Forwarders should empower their commercial and operational teams to develop flexible and creative solutions, such as the bespoke charter services and cross-continental trucking routes described by participants. This may involve creating pre-approved frameworks for alternative routings, mode shifts, or the use of non-standard services to avoid bureaucratic delays during a crisis. Building a diversified portfolio of carrier relationships and regional partners is essential to enhancing this operational agility.

Develop a Human-Centric Technology Strategy: Technology investments should be aimed at augmenting, not replacing, the human element. The goal should be to automate low-value, repetitive tasks (e.g., standard tracking updates) to free up account managers' time for high-value activities such as strategic reviews, collaborative problem-solving, and relationship-building. As one client noted, technology cannot understand the business context or what is truly important to them, a role that remains firmly in the human domain.

Formalize Resilience as a Service Offering: Forwarders can and should differentiate themselves by explicitly marketing their resilience capabilities. This could include offering services like supply chain risk assessments, developing contingency plans in partnership with clients, and providing managed access to a diversified network of backup carriers and routes. This reframes the commercial discussion from a commoditized cost-per-container to a strategic investment in supply chain security, directly addressing the client-driven trend of establishing active backup scenarios.

Broader Industry and Economic Implications

Beyond the firm level, these findings signal a systemic transformation in the business model of freight forwarding and have broader implications for the global economy. The industry appears to be moving from a transactional, cost-plus service model to one more akin to a strategic consultancy, where value is derived from knowledge, flexibility, and risk management. This shift positions the commercial professional not as a salesperson, but as a risk management consultant for the client's supply chain.

The collective move from "just-in-time" to "just-in-case" logistics and the prioritization of resilience over pure cost efficiency suggest a fundamental change in global supply chain strategy. Industries are beginning to internalize the high costs of disruption, which may lead to more robust, albeit potentially more expensive, supply networks. This trend could influence macroeconomic models by placing a higher premium on stability and predictability, potentially creating inflationary pressures as redundancy is built back into lean systems, but also yielding economic benefits through increased stability and reduced losses from disruptions. For the freight forwarding industry, this represents a historic opportunity to evolve from a commoditized service provider into a strategic enabler of global trade resilience, fundamentally elevating its role in the world economy.

5.3 Limitations and Recommendations for Future Research

While this study provides valuable qualitative insights into its chosen topic, it is important to acknowledge its limitations, which in turn suggest productive avenues for future research.

The primary limitation is the qualitative nature and limited sample size of the study. While the interviews with 15 participants provided unparalleled depth and nuance, the findings are based on a small, purposively selected sample and may not be generalizable to the entire freight forwarding industry. Furthermore, as detailed in the participant profile, the sample was primarily focused on experienced professionals and large multinational corporations with a European and North American focus. The perspectives of small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) or those operating predominantly in other economic regions may differ significantly.

Based on these limitations and the generative framework provided in Table 5, the following recommendations for future research are proposed:

Quantitative Validation: Future research should seek to quantitatively test the hypotheses generated by this qualitative study. A large-scale survey could be distributed to a broader, more diverse sample of freight forwarders and shippers globally to measure the statistical correlation between specific commercial strategies (e.g., frequency and transparency of communication) and client retention rates during a documented crisis period. This would help establish the generalizability of the patterns identified herein.

Investigating New Contractual Models: As an extension of the first avenue for research identified in Table 5, a dedicated study should explore the development and viability of new contractual models based on shared risk and resilience metrics. This could involve a comparative analysis of emerging contractual frameworks (e.g., gain-sharing agreements, resilience-based Service Level Agreements) and their impact on client-forwarder collaboration and performance during disruptions.

The Impact of AI-Driven Analytics: This study found that technology is currently used more for visibility than for proactive solutions. Future research could focus specifically on the impact of advanced Artificial Intelligence and predictive analytics on crisis response. A comparative case study of firms that have heavily invested in these technologies versus those that have not could yield valuable insights into their effectiveness in anticipating disruptions, optimizing responses, and potentially automating some of the "uncertainty absorption" functions currently performed by humans.

Leadership and Human Capital Development in Crisis Resilience: Flowing directly from this study's strong emphasis on the "human element," future research could explore the specific leadership qualities and human capital development strategies that foster organizational resilience. This could involve case studies on training programs, leadership styles, and corporate cultures that empower commercial teams to act as the effective "uncertainty absorbers" and strategic consultants that clients now demand.

In conclusion, this research confirms that the freight forwarding industry has entered a new paradigm defined by perpetual crisis. The findings demonstrate a clear and fundamental shift in the commercial landscape, where success is no longer dictated by price alone, but by a sophisticated blend of resilience, strategic partnership, and transparent communication. While technology serves as a vital enabler, the human element—embodied by the commercial professional acting as a trusted advisor and "uncertainty absorber"—has proven to be the decisive factor in navigating this new reality. The strategies identified herein are not merely tactics for surviving the next disruption; they represent the new standard for commercial excellence and the foundation for building lasting, resilient client relationships in a permanently volatile global market.

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Annex 1- Interview Scripts

Semi-Structured Interview Script

Introduction – Small personal Introduction, the purpose of the research, and the context of the interview.

Inform that the information collected will be anonymous and used only for academic purposes.

Confirm consent to record the interview and explain the expected duration.

Questions for Subject Matter Experts (SMEs)

<u>Background and Experience</u>

Can you describe your role and experience in the Freight Forwarding Industry?

How long have you worked in this field, and what has been your primary focus?

<u>Understanding Crisis Impact</u>

In your experience, what are the most common challenges faced by freight forwarders during market crises (e.g., economic downturns, natural disasters, pandemics)?

How do crises typically affect client relationships and retention strategies in this industry?

<u>Commercial Strategies</u>

What strategies have you found most effective for retaining clients during a crisis?

Can you share any specific adjustments to pricing, service offerings, or operational practices that you have implemented during crises?

<u>Innovation and Technology</u>

What role does technology play in mitigating the impacts of market crises in freight forwarding?

Are there any digital tools or platforms that have proven particularly effective during volatile periods?

<u>Collaboration and Communication</u>

How do you maintain transparency and trust with clients during crises?

Can you provide an example of a successful collaboration or initiative that helped sustain client relationships during a challenging time?

Future Outlook

Based on your experience, what should the Freight Forwarding Industry prioritize to enhance resilience and client retention in future crises?

Questions for Clients

Background and Relationship with Freight Forwarders

Can you describe your company's reliance on freight forwarders and the nature of your business relationship with them?

How long have you been working with freight forwarders, and what services do you typically use?

Crisis Experience

Can you recall a specific market crisis that significantly affected your business? How did your freight forwarder respond?

What were the most critical challenges you faced during that period?

Service Expectations and Evaluation

What qualities do you value most in a freight forwarder, especially during times of crisis?

Were there any specific strategies or actions by your freight forwarder that helped mitigate the impact of the crisis on your operations?

Were there any shortcomings or areas where they could have improved?

Trust and Communication

How important is communication and transparency from your freight forwarder during uncertain times?

Can you provide an example where effective communication made a difference in your decision to retain their services?

Recommendations and Insights

From your perspective, what should freight forwarders prioritize to better support their clients during market crises?

What advice would you give to other businesses relying on freight forwarders during challenging times?

Conclusion

Thank the participant for their time and insights and offer to share a summary of the research findings once the study is complete.