

TANKS

ON A MISSION

South American tank container use is on the up, with Argentina's MissionLine Logistics very keen and well-placed to continue its key role in driving this ongoing growth.

Despite being marked by "constant change", the various markets for tank container logistics in South America are nonetheless showing clear signs of growth, says Richard Kraayenbrink, managing director of Argentina's MissionLine Logistics. Among other things, this trend is being fuelled by a general movement away from road tanker transports to intermodalism, he reveals, explaining that in the context of his own company's operations Brazil represents the largest single market followed by Argentina, Uruguay and Paraguay.

"Many spot and, of course, regular steady business is offered to us from abroad thanks to our active participation in professional web-based networks, like LinkedIn, and our attendance at international fairs and exhibitions, like Transport Logistic, Intermodal Europe, Intermodal South America and the Asociación Petroquímica y Química Latinoamericana (APLA)," he continues.

Unit shortages

While tank container use is on the up, however, the regional South American market is not without its difficulties. For example, specialised equipment is not always available when and where it is needed, he notes, with tank containers not only used to move product long-distance around the globe, but also employed by many users for intermediate storage. This can impinge on the pool of available assets.

The ongoing Covid-19 pandemic has also given rise to numerous disruptions and headaches, ranging from booking delays and the lack of available space on shipping lines, to roll overs, port skipping and the cancellation of routes, such as those between South America and India. Furthermore, in terms of the leasing sector, there is currently "a shortage of all kinds of units" caused by lockdowns and similar restrictions that have halted the usual flow of tank container movements around the planet. ➔



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Richard Kraayenbrink, Managing Director, MissionLine Logistics

When exactly the world and its markets will return to some semblance of normality is, of course, difficult to predict, although Kraayenbrink reports that things do appear to be going in the right direction. Having previously been required to implement remote working arrangements, MissionLine is now, for example, beginning a return to more conventional office-based practices in Argentina and Brazil.

Partnering for success

Headquartered in the San Isidro district of Buenos Aires, MissionLine has, since its founding in 2005, been registered with the Argentine customs authorities as a non-vessel operating common carrier (NVOCC), freight forwarder, container operator and import/export license-holder. "Our involvement with tank containers comes from previous professional experiences in the Argentine market and in 2006 we were appointed by VTG Tanktainer as their sole agents for Argentina," he says.

After expanding the scope of this arrangement to include Uruguay and Paraguay, MissionLine then became VTG's agents for Brazil in 2014. Five years later, this was further enlarged, with the two companies forming VTG-MissionLine Tanktainer do Brasil, a joint venture that, Kraayenbrink notes, "has been very successful to date" and which is readily able to serve the bulk of global destinations.

Certainly, it would appear that that partnership between the two companies has been highly beneficial to all concerned, including their many national and international customers. "As agents for VTG Tanktainer, we offer all types of moves - door to door, pier to pier, door to pier, pier to door - according to our customers' needs," he says, explaining that the arrangement also sees MissionLine acting as the German company's "local representative before the authorities, customers, customs, shipping lines, port terminals, cleaning stations, depots" and more.

Local expertise

"We have had a long and fruitful relationship with VTG and all their management and different divisions all these years," he says, citing the support given "by one of the top players" in the field as having greatly aided MissionLine and its operations. "The multinational companies in Argentina we used to deal with before the agency agreement had ongoing contracts/operations with VTG in our and other markets. This boosted our commercial relationship with them," Kraayenbrink continues. "Like most markets, the South American market has many particularities, regulations and a defined local business personality and our commercial teams have that expertise, which was a plus for VTG."

Few things stay the same, though, and at the start of November VTG Tanktainer's Overseas Division was acquired by the UK-based Suttons Group. "Suttons wasn't present in South America - it was in their planning and this opportunity proved perfect. VTG's shares in the Brazilian joint venture were also included so, from 2022, we shall be Suttons' partner in Brazil and their agents for Argentina and Uruguay," he reports.

"We would like to thank VTG Tanktainer's management and personnel for the 15 years of working together and for the opportunity given to us to develop the tank container business in these countries," he says, describing the relationship between the two companies as both "professional and friendly" and the agency network as "very important" and mutually conducive. "As they say, you need two to tango," he states.



Products and customers

Serving a broad range of industries, MissionLine maintains a customer base comprised primarily of large local and international companies. Including both traders and brokers, these companies import and export a host of diverse products, from chemicals and petrochemicals to base oils and used cooking oil as well as glycerine, fatty acids and turpentine. However, the highest standards of safety and quality remain universal requirements across the board.

"These issues are very important to us," Kraayenbrink states, reporting that this is another area in which the company has benefitted from the exchange of expertise with VTG. "We also have a series of points that we pass on to our customers every time we receive enquiries, such as the Safety Data Sheet of the product required to transport or store it; advice about the minimum/maximum loading authorised; technical information on equipment; and recommendations when loading/discharging. Every product is different and some can be very hard to handle," he notes.

Advancing the cause

MissionLine's enviable reputation as an expert in containerised bulk transport and handling has not only helped it win and retain many different customers, but it has also seen it regularly approached by top-tier firms in Argentina and elsewhere looking for input and advice on a host of industrial projects. The company, has, for example, been requested to evaluate LNG virtual pipelines; design custom bulk containers for frac sand logistics; and develop specialist systems for the importation of cocoa liquor and cocoa butter in active heating units both with and without agitators.

At the same time, the company's leasing arm, which services spot, short-, medium- and long term-contracts via a mixed fleet of standard and specialist tank containers, has also played its part in advancing the use of tank containers in the region. "Among our milestones in the leasing division, we are proud to have been part of the first Argentine reefer juice export in ISO tanks," Kraayenbrink states.

By switching from traditional drums to tank containers, the client in question was able to ship chilled lemon juice in volumes of 19,000 litres per single consignment as opposed to the 17,000 litres of packed cargo in a traditional box container. Meanwhile, as testament to the adaptability and rugged dexterity of its units, MissionLine's leasing business is also a supplier of what it terms 'flying tanks' to the Argentine navy's South Orcadas Antarctic base, further proving that there are few places on the planet where tank containers cannot operate successfully.

"Promoting the usage of tank containers and bulk containers has always been a priority for us," Kraayenbrink explains. A good example of this came in 2019 when MissionLine organised the first Intermodal Bulk Container Exhibition in Mendoza, Argentina. One of a number of events staged by the company, it saw MissionLine unveiling a range of novel tank container designs previously unseen on the local market, including temperature-controlled, half-height, bitumen and copper concentrate units.

Able to offer a full gamut of tank containers and related services, backed by extensive technical support and know-how, MissionLine prides itself on the strength of its commercial and operations teams. "We know the market, we keep close contact with our clients and we listen to them as we are customer-oriented. We're always there," Kraayenbrink states. "We keep updated of the latest innovations and products on the market in order to solve any problem or improve any logistics our customers could benefit from." ■