

Analysis of the Decline in Export Agency Services Using the 5-Whys Method at PT Bukit Prima Bahari Palembang Branch

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Abstract. PT Bukit Prima Bahari (BPB) Palembang Branch, as a provider of export ship agency services, has faced a significant decline in the number of assignments (calls) for mother vessel services. Despite stable and even increasing vessel arrival trends at Kertapati Port during the 2022–2025 period, the number of assignments received by BPB has consistently decreased, reaching zero in 2025. This situation indicates strategic dysfunction in value communication, commercial relationship continuity, and service governance, necessitating an in-depth analysis of the root causes. This study aims to identify the root causes of the decline in export agency service demand at BPB Palembang, map the operational and marketing factors most influential in customer decision-making, and formulate measurable, implementable recommendations for service recovery and enhanced competitiveness. Using the 5 Whys technique, this case study analyzes data from semi-structured interviews, port-call observations, and operational documents. The findings point to two key issues: disrupted commercial continuity due to turnover of key personnel, and weak value framing that made BPB's pricing appear high without explicit service evidence. The study recommends strengthening the value proposition, standardizing "apple-to-apple" price comparisons, and improving commercial governance to enhance document readiness and coordination. These insights support more effective service recovery, price realization, and operational reliability.

Keywords: root cause, export service, ship agency, 5 Whys, service value.

INTRODUCTION

Indonesia is one of the world's major coal exporters (International Energy Agency, 2023; BP Statistical Review, 2021). The export process involves many parties and stages, ranging from document readiness, licensing, port coordination, to ship departure (Notteboom & Haralambides, 2020; Lam & Gu, 2021). In this long work chain, ship agency services act as a liaison that ensures all processes run quickly, precisely, and according to the rules (Kavussanos et al., 2019). PT Bukit Prima Bahari (BPB) Palembang Branch, as part of the PT Bukit Asam ecosystem, handles domestic agencies (tug & barge) and export agencies for mother vessels. The characteristics of Palembang—with the flow of the Musi River and the involvement of many agencies—make neat coordination, document readiness, and schedule certainty very important (Nguyen et al., 2022; Acciaro et al., 2018).

During the period from 2023 to 2025, the assignment of export agency services at BPB Palembang Branch has declined sharply, with no assignments recorded in 2025 (Huo et al., 2021; Wiegmans & Konings, 2023). This situation raises a critical question: Why has demand for export agency services declined so significantly? Is it due to uncompetitive pricing, unproven service quality, unclear value communication, or coordination challenges across multiple agencies (Liu et al., 2020; Pantouvakis & Psomas, 2021)? Answering this question is not only vital for BPB's operational sustainability but also reflects broader challenges faced by service-based firms in dynamic, multi-stakeholder logistics environments (Zailani et al., 2018; Yang et al., 2022).

Previous studies in maritime and logistics services have explored various factors

influencing agency service performance, including service quality, customer satisfaction, communication effectiveness, and operational governance (Alsalfiti & Notteboom, 2025a, 2025b; Dewa, 2023; Yuliantini et al., 2022). For instance, research by Adawiyah & Taharuddin (2024) highlights the role of service quality and interpersonal communication in shaping customer loyalty in shipping agencies. Similarly, studies by Kwartama & Karimunanto (2022) and Wibowo et al. (2021) emphasize the importance of optimizing agency services and employee performance in enhancing operational smoothness and customer retention. However, these studies often focus on general service quality and operational factors without delving deeply into the root causes of sudden and sustained declines in service demand, particularly in the context of export-oriented, multi-agency port operations.

The research gap identified in this study lies in the limited application of structured root cause analysis methods—such as the 5 Whys technique—to diagnose service demand decline in the shipping agency sector. While existing literature acknowledges the importance of service quality and coordination, few studies systematically trace surface-level symptoms to underlying, actionable causes in a real-world case setting. Furthermore, prior research tends to adopt a fragmented perspective, examining either operational or marketing aspects in isolation rather than integrating both into a holistic diagnostic framework.

The novelty of this research lies in its application of the 5 Whys method within a single-case study design to uncover the root causes of export agency service decline at BPB Palembang. Unlike conventional descriptive or correlational approaches, this method enables a stepwise, cause-and-effect exploration that moves beyond assumptions to identify tangible, intervention-ready factors. Additionally, this study integrates operational observations, internal document analysis, and managerial interviews to triangulate findings—a methodological combination rarely applied in maritime agency research. By doing so, this research not only addresses a specific organizational problem but also contributes methodologically to the field of service operations and logistics management.

The urgency of this study is underscored by the continued decline in BPB's agency assignments amid stable or growing mother vessel arrivals at Kertapati Port. Without timely diagnosis and corrective action, BPB risks further erosion of market position, loss of key client relationships, and diminished revenue streams. More broadly, the insights generated can inform other logistics service providers facing similar challenges in multi-agency, regulation-intensive environments.

Objectively, this study seeks to identify the root causes of the decline in demand for export agencies at BPB Palembang, map the parts of the process and marketing that most influence customer decisions, and prepare measurable initial recommendations for assignment recovery. In other words, this study aims to determine not only "what went wrong" but also "what needs to be fixed first" so that results can be felt in the field.

The questions that prompted this research were simple but important: What are the main causes of the decline in assignments, which parts of the process and marketing need to be improved first, and what is the most realistic quick step to restore trust and assignments? The answers to these questions are expected to provide clear direction for BPB to improve bid performance, strengthen relationships with principals/owners, and present more convincing evidence of service value.

The expected contribution is multifaceted. From a practical perspective, this study

provides a list of easy-to-execute corrective actions, ranging from strengthening customer relationships and preparing "apple-to-apple" offer materials to proof of performance as proof of value. From an academic perspective, this study demonstrates how the 5 Whys can be applied in the context of river shipping agency services involving many agencies, while linking root cause analysis with B2B marketing architecture (e.g., value-based pricing, key account management, and process governance) in a measurable manner. As such, the results are expected to provide a strong foothold for service recovery programs and more effective customer win-back strategies.

MATERIALS AND METHOD

This research employed a single-case study approach at *BPB* Palembang Branch using a descriptive qualitative method. This choice enabled an in-depth exploration of the root causes of the decline in demand for export agency services—not merely surface-level symptoms, but the core problems that could be acted upon. The research location was *PT Bukit Prima Bahari* Palembang Branch.

The study subject was the VP of Operations, who supervised the service and appointment process. Key data were collected through semi-structured interviews with short but open-ended thematic guides, allowing researchers to explore reasons for winning or losing appointments, perceptions of price versus value, and coordination or document constraints. Process observations were conducted on the main stages of port calls (from pre-arrival, clearance, docking/loading, to departure) to record times, deviations from service targets, and friction points. Internal documents—such as SOPs, port call track records, and bid files (including scope, assumptions, and cost components)—were used to corroborate the results of interviews and observations. Secondary data consisted of digital licensing rules and systems (*Inaportnet*, *INSW*, *SSm Pengangkut*, *PKKA/Simpla*).

Data processing followed the Miles & Huberman (1994) principles: data were reduced to focus on the core issue, presented in matrices or thematic summaries, and initial conclusions were drawn and continuously verified. The research applied the *5 Whys* technique, a structured approach that repeatedly asked "why" to uncover the most basic causes that were realistic to correct. Findings were then mapped into a value mapping framework that linked problems to measurable improvement points, such as value framing, key account management, and "apple-to-apple" offering formats. From this, priorities for action were established between quick wins (implementable quickly with real impact) and program initiatives requiring broader structuring.

Data validity was maintained through triangulation of sources (management, operations, documents) and methods (interviews, observations, document review). A summary of initial findings was shared with key informants for member checking to confirm the researchers' interpretations. The entire process was documented in an audit trail containing analytical decisions, draft versions of findings, and supporting evidence.

This research adhered to ethical principles, including informed consent, confidentiality of informant identities, and restriction of data use to scientific purposes only. Study limitations included the single-case design (offering high depth but limited generalizability) and potential incompleteness of historical performance data. To address these, triangulation and reconfirmation with informants were used to strengthen result reliability.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This section presents the main findings of the research which begins with an overview of the arrival data of mother vessels at Kertapati Port in the 2022–2025 period, followed by a comparison of the number of appointments (calls) received by BPB in the same period. After that, the results of interviews and in-depth discussions related to the analysis process of 5 Whys with VP of Operations were presented to explore the root of the problem of declining demand for export agency services.

Mother Vessel Arrival Trends and BPB Call Comparison (2022–2025)

Table 1. Total Mother Vessel Arrivals at Kertapati Port (2022–September 2025)

Year	Number of MVs
2022	23
2023	58
2024	110
2025 (January to September)	89

Source : PT BPB Data (2025)

Data on the arrival of mother vessels shows that shipping activities in Kertapati are relatively stable and even tend to increase in certain years. This increase in arrivals should provide greater opportunities for the appointment of agency services, considering that each arrival requires document handling, agency coordination, and operational services involving ship agents.

SUMMARY KEAGENAN EKSPOR PT BUKIT PRIMA BAHARI TAHUN 2022

NO	VESSEL NAME	PRINCIPAL	BUYER	POL	POD	QTY	TA	TD
1	MV IKAN PANDAN	OLDENDORFF	IMR	PALEMBANG	THAILAND	53.815	02/04/22	06/04/22
2	MV IKAN PANDAN	OLDENDORFF	IMR	PALEMBANG	THAILAND	53.815	17/04/22	20/04/22
3	MV IKAN PANDAN	OLDENDORFF	IMR	PALEMBANG	THAILAND	53.400	19/05/22	23/05/22
4	MV BBG QINZHOU	PT WALLEM SENTOSA SHIPPING	MIT	PALEMBANG	INDIA	78.193	28/06/22	04/07/22

NO	VESSEL NAME	PRINCIPAL	BUYER	POL	POD	QTY	TA	TD
6	MV XI LONG 18	Jade Alliance Shipping Pte Ltd	Suek AG	PALEMBANG	VIETNAM	64.800	18/07/23	22/07/23

SUMMARY KEAGENAN EKSPOR PT BUKIT PRIMA BAHARI TAHUN 2024

NO	VESSEL NAME	PRINCIPAL	BUYER	POL	POD	QTY	TA	TD
1	MV SCROOGE MCDUCK	Lotus Ocean Transportation (HK) Limited	Bulk Trading Far East	PALEMBANG	CHINA	66.400	19/05/24	23/05/24
2	MV DADAN PERTIWI	Avenir Maritime	Suek AG	PALEMBANG	BANGLADESH	54.370	19/07/24	28/07/24

Figure 1. Trend of Mother Vessel Arrivals at Kertapati Port (2022–2025)

Source: PT BPB internal data visualization, 2025

Table 2. Total Calls for PT BPB Mother Vessel Export Agency Services in Palembang (2022–September 2025)

Year	Number of MVs
2022	4
2023	1
2024	2
2025 (January to September)	0

Source : PT BPB Data (2025)

Although the trend of mother vessel arrivals has not decreased significantly, the number of calls or appointments received by BPB actually shows a sharp decrease from year to year. The mismatch between market opportunities and call realization is an early indicator that there

are internal and external problems that affect BPB's competitiveness as an export agent.

Results of interviews and discussions related to 5 Whys

To trace the main cause of the decline, in-depth interviews were conducted with the VP of Operations and related internal parties. These joint discussions resulted in several key questions that were then deepened through the 5 Whys technique to identify actionable root causes. Preliminary findings show that there is a disruption of commercial continuity due to the change of key personnel and weak value framing, which causes the price of BPB to look less competitive in the eyes of the principal even though the quality of operational services is actually still good. The analysis of the 5 Whys resulting from this discussion process became the basis for the preparation of improvement recommendations in the next section, especially related to strengthening proof of service, restructuring value arguments, and more consistent commercial governance.

Table 3. Defining Problems with the 5 Whys approach

(Why? – 1) Why is there no or decreased appointment of PT BPB's mother vessel export agency services?	Because the Principal / Owner does not choose PT BPB as an agent to serve their ship
Why? - 2	There are two causes, namely: a. The price is considered too high b. PT BPB's marketing is less than optimal
Why? - 3	a. The price is too high because PT BPB adjusts to the cost and profit. b. There has been a transition in the role of marketing where previously there were marketing personnel who had opened access and fostered relationships with the principals / owners, but after the person concerned moved, there was no replacement who was able to reach the market with the same effectiveness.
Why? - 4	a. Because the cost incurred by mother vessel export agency services is relatively high and consumes a lot of labor because there are many documents that need to be taken care of and the company also needs profits that are quite the same as the previous profits when the marketing personnel were still there. b. Because knowledge of the market and key relationships has not been institutionalized, the network is not easy for the team to continue.
Why? - 5	a. Because the cost component of mother vessel export services is indeed high and many cannot be suppressed while the call volume is getting lower. Margins are also maintained to cover cost deviations and ensure service readiness. Without the framing of the value, these margins look like a markup. b. Marketing governance such as standardization of communication materials / offers has not yet been established.
<i>Root Cause</i>	Loss of marketing continuity (access & relationships) and lack of value framing so that prices appear high.

Source : Interview Results with VP of Operations, 2025

The results of the study show a clear mismatch between the increase in market opportunities shown by the relatively stable trend of mother vessel arrivals and the decrease in

the number of calls received by BPB. This disharmony indicates that the main problem does not lie in the reduction of shipping activities, but rather in internal factors and external perceptions of the value of the services offered by the company. This is in line with the basic principles of service management, where a decline in demand often occurs when proof of value is not consistently delivered to decision-makers.

The in-depth discussion through the interview with the VP of Operations reinforces the indication that the root of the problem is not in the quality of operations in the field, but in the aspects of commercial continuity and value framing. The turnover of key personnel leads to the disconnection of historical communication flows with principals, loss of understanding of the context of previous cooperation, and weakening of informal access which is actually an important component in the agency industry. When this continuity is disrupted, the relationship that was previously built is forced to return to zero, so that BPB's offer no longer has the relational advantage that was previously built over many years.

In addition, 5 Whys' analysis revealed that BPB's commercial offerings were not able to demonstrate "evidence of performance" strong enough to explain why the price given was feasible and competitive. In cost-sensitive market conditions, the absence of value framing causes BPB to be perceived as more expensive even though the quality of service is actually adequate. This results in a price-driven rejection situation, which is a condition when prices are considered irrational simply because they are not supported by a clear value argument.

These findings are consistent with the service operations literature which states that value communication gaps often have more influence on purchasing decisions than actual service quality. Thus, weak value delivery and loss of commercial continuity explain why call declines occur even though market opportunities are not diminished.

The results of this discussion emphasized that the recovery strategy is not enough to be carried out in the operational realm alone. Strengthening commercial governance, including standardization of price comparisons, presentation of proof of service, and reconstruction of relationships with principals, is key to restoring trust and increasing demand for services. With a more structured approach, BPB has the potential to not only stop the downward trend, but also win back old customers who had moved to other providers.

CONCLUSION

This study concludes that the decline in demand for mother vessel export agency services at PT Bukit Prima Bahari (BPB) Palembang Branch stemmed not from weakening market opportunities—given stable mother vessel arrivals—but from internal issues disrupting commercial continuity, particularly after key personnel changes and weak service value framing that made pricing appear uncompetitive to principals. To restore competitiveness, *BPB* should enhance service value communication with structured explanations of benefits, processes, and reliability; standardize "apple-to-apple" quotes with clear scopes and assumptions to avoid competitor misunderstandings; strengthen commercial governance via improved document readiness and pre-submission discipline for service consistency; and rebuild principal relationships through proactive communication, win-back strategies, and greater performance transparency to foster trust. For future research, a multi-case study across other Indonesian river ports could validate these findings, exploring quantitative impacts of value-framing interventions on win rates using longitudinal bid data.

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