



HOW DO TRAINS MOVE HOLIDAY GIFTS?

Key Facts

- Holiday goods move months before shoppers buy them.
- Intermodal containers shift easily between ships, trains, and trucks.
- Freight rail moves large volumes inland efficiently and with lower emissions.

Americans spent more than \$1 trillion during the 2025 holiday season, according to the National Retail Federation. Pokémon cards, Barbie, LEGO sets, Hot Wheels, and Nintendo games were among the hottest gifts. Pokémon alone generated \$2.5 billion in U.S. toy sales that year. Some of those favorites are shaping up to be big gifts again in 2026.

So how do trains help get those gifts under the tree? Freight railroads move huge quantities of consumer goods in intermodal containers, connecting ports with distribution centers and markets across the country. Long before a gift reaches a store shelf or doorstep, it may have crossed an ocean by ship, traveled hundreds or thousands of miles by train, and finished its journey by truck. Much of that journey can happen during the summer, months before the holiday shopping season kicks off.

Holiday gifts often travel in intermodal containers.

Nearly every gift (and nearly everything in your home) has to get to you somehow. For many consumer goods, that journey includes [intermodal shipping](#). These standardized containers, often seen on trucks along the highway, can carry almost anything that fits inside, from toys and electronics to clothing and home goods.

The same container can move by ship, train, and truck without unloading the freight inside, or it can be unloaded near the port and then reloaded along with other freight going to the same place and sent inland. Each mode plays a role: ships cross oceans, railroads move large volumes long distances inland, and trucks connect rail terminals to distribution centers, stores, and customers. The journey of a container is often:

Factory → Train or Truck → Foreign Port → Ship → U.S. Port → Freight Train → Distribution Center → Truck → Store or Customer

Freight railroads are a critical part of intermodal shipping.

U.S. railroads handled 14.06 million intermodal containers and trailers in 2025, up 1.5%, or nearly 213,000 units, from 2024. It was the second-highest annual intermodal volume on record. Roughly half of rail intermodal volume is associated with imports or exports. Freight trains provide retailers with enormous capacity. A single intermodal train can carry the equivalent of hundreds of truckloads. And those containers can hold a lot. To put just one in perspective, a 40-foot intermodal container could theoretically hold about 10 million Pokémon cards once packaged for shipment.

Shipping intermodal containers on freight trains is also good for the environment. On average, one train moves one ton nearly 500 miles on a single gallon of fuel, and trains are three to four times more fuel efficient than trucks, on average.

Holiday gifts are moving while it's still summer.

While you're shopping for a swimsuit or patio furniture, retailers may already be preparing shipments of winter coats, faux Christmas trees, and other holiday goods. For imports, products can spend weeks crossing the ocean before containers even begin their journey from U.S. ports to inland markets. A typical timeline might look like this:

- **Fall 2025:** Retailers forecast demand, decide what to sell, and start designing the merchandise.
- **Winter/Spring 2026:** Buyers finalize orders, and factories prepare production.
- **Spring/Summer 2026:** Merchandise is manufactured and packaged.
- **Summer/Early Fall 2026:** Containers move by ship, rail, and truck through U.S. distribution networks.
- **Fall/Holiday 2026:** Merchandise reaches stores and fulfillment centers.

The peak months for intermodal are typically August, September, and October, largely because so much holiday-related freight is already on the move then.

Sometimes, shoppers surprise retailers.

KPop Demon Hunters became a breakout hit after its June 2025 release. Demand emerged so quickly that much of the official merchandise couldn't be manufactured and distributed in large quantities in time for Christmas. A limited selection made it to shoppers for the holidays, while broader product lines followed in 2026.

That's a big challenge freight networks have to solve for. Retailers plan shipments months ahead, but consumer demand can change quickly. Intermodal gives shippers access to the capacity and flexibility of rail for moving large volumes between ports and inland markets, combined with trucks for the first and/or last legs of the trip.

This is one reason freight railroads' [private investments](#) in their intermodal networks matter. Railroads expand intermodal terminals, add tracks and container-handling space, install cranes that transfer containers between trains and trucks, and deploy technology that helps manage containers through busy terminals. These investments increase the number of trains and containers terminals can handle, helping railroads provide capacity when retailers need to replenish inventory or respond to changing demand.

THE BOTTOM LINE

By the time you buy a holiday gift, there's a good chance it crossed an ocean, traveled inland by freight rail, and reached a distribution center weeks or months earlier. The holidays arrive in November and December, but freight rail helps deliver them months before.