What an Industrial MRO Distributor Does — and How to Choose

cBallast Technical Sourcing · Industrial MRO distribution · issued 2026-11-04 · cballast.com/documents/industrial-mro-distributor

What an industrial MRO distributor actually does, the two business models hiding under one name (stock-led and identifier-led), how distributors price, the eight checks before a first order, contract models from spot RFQ to frame agreement, and the account pack that opens a supplier account anywhere.

The short answer

An industrial MRO distributor supplies the parts and consumables that keep equipment running (maintenance, repair and operations), as opposed to the materials that go into the product. It stands between hundreds of makers and one buyer.
It earns its margin with four jobs: putting many makers on one account, identifying the right part from imperfect data, handling documents and logistics, and extending terms.
Two business models share the name. A stock-led distributor is built around a warehouse and sells what is on its shelves, fast. An identifier-led distributor is built around a catalogue of part numbers and supplies whatever the number identifies, from maker and authorised-distribution stock. cballast.com is identifier-led.
Pick by the clock and the list. Needed today and common: stock-led. Needed in days or weeks, mixed-brand, maker-specific or with certificates: identifier-led. Most plants and fleets need one of each, and far fewer suppliers than they have.
Check five things before the first order: legal entity, authorised or independent status, certificates per line, the rule on equivalents, account terms.

1. What an industrial MRO distributor is

MRO stands for maintenance, repair and operations. (In aviation the O is overhaul; this article is about industry and shipping.) It covers what a site consumes to stay running without any of it ending up in the finished product: bearings and power transmission; seals, O-rings and gaskets; pumps and pump spares; valves and actuators; fittings, flanges and hoses; filtration; hydraulics and pneumatics; electrical components, drives and controls; sensors and instrumentation; fasteners; tools and consumables.

MRO is a small share of what most companies spend and a large share of their suppliers, purchase orders and invoices. The usual rule of thumb is that roughly 80% of suppliers carry roughly 20% of spend, and MRO is where most of that tail lives. The distributor exists because no buyer can run a commercial relationship with every maker behind every part.

The four jobs that justify a distributor's margin:

Aggregation. Hundreds of makers on one vendor record, one PO, one invoice.
Identification. Turning a nameplate photo, a superseded number or an equipment maker's position number into the component's real designation.
Documents and logistics. Certificates per line, origin and customs codes, consolidation, delivery to a site or to a ship's agent.
Terms. Credit and consolidated invoicing against one account.

A reseller that does none of the four is forwarding emails. That is how one RFQ comes back as several quotes from the same shelf with stacked margins: five quotes, one warehouse.

2. Two business models under one name

Stock-led distributor	Identifier-led distributor
Built around	A warehouse	A catalogue of part numbers
Sells	What is on its shelves	What the number identifies, from maker and authorised-distribution stock
Strength	Speed: same-day or next-day on stocked lines	Breadth: mixed-brand lists, maker-specific numbers, marine and process spares, certificates per line
Range limit	The shelf	The identifier. If it has a number, it can be sourced
Price logic	Includes the cost of holding stock ready for you	Priced per order at the source; no stockholding cost built in
Buying mode	Cart, card, counter	Account, quote, invoice
Weak at	The long tail, maker-specific spares, documents per line	Same-day breakdowns
Example	Your local industrial stockist; the large national catalogue houses	cballast.com

Neither model is better. They answer different clocks. Paying for a shelf is right when the line is down. Paying for a shelf on a part needed in four weeks is the most common way MRO budgets leak, and it is invisible because each purchase looks small.

Other labels you will meet sit on top of these two models. Specialist distributors (bearings and power transmission, fluid power, fasteners, electrical wholesale) are usually stock-led within one family. Integrated supply providers run your storeroom: vendor-managed inventory, consignment stock, vending. Ship suppliers deliver stores by IMPA code alongside the vessel. Surplus specialists hold discontinued hardware. Ask any of them the same question: do you sell what you stock, or what I can identify?

3. Authorised or independent

This is the second distinction that matters, and it is separate from the first.

Authorised distributor. Appointed by the maker, usually for a territory. Carries the maker's warranty and direct traceability. Range is limited to the appointed brands. Often the only route for maker-only and warranty-bound parts.

Independent distributor. Tied to no maker, so it can cover hundreds of brands on one account. Its legitimacy rests on where it buys. Ask three things: through which channel is this line sourced, is it new with the maker's warranty, and can certificates and origin be shown before shipment.

cballast is independent. It buys through OEM and authorised-distributor channels, so certificates and traceability come from the maker's own chain across all 1,000+ brands.

4. How MRO distributors price

List price and multipliers. Makers publish list prices. Distributors buy at a discount from list and sell at list less a customer discount.
Contract pricing. Account customers get a discount matrix by product group, or fixed prices on part numbers that repeat.
Spot pricing. Everything outside the contract is priced per line, per enquiry. This is where most of the long tail is bought, and where it is bought worst.
What sits on top. Freight, small-order fees, certificate fees, export or marine packing, currency.

Where buyers overpay, in order of size: buying the long tail at spot prices from dozens of vendors; paying stocked-shelf prices for parts that were needed weeks out; blanket certificate requirements that price a 3.1 onto washers; freight per line instead of per consolidated box. None of these shows up as a high unit price, which is why price benchmarking alone never finds them.

5. Choosing one: eight checks

Check | What good looks like | cballast.com |

Legal entity | A registration number you can verify in a public register; bank account in the same name and country | Norway-based; organisation number on quotes and invoices, checkable at brreg.no |
Authorised or independent | Stated openly, per brand if asked | Independent; buys through OEM and authorised-distributor channels |
Identifier coverage | Accepts the numbers you actually hold | 336,000+ part numbers; maker part number, OEM code or IMPA code accepted; product pages carry OEM, drawing, superseded and competitor cross-references |
Mixed-brand lists | One quote, one PO, one invoice | Yes; numbers not in the catalogue are sourced on request |
Certificates | Stated per line, before the order | Class (DNV, ABS, LR, BV, RINA, CCS, KR, NK), ATEX/IECEx, MED wheelmark and EN 10204, where the maker holds the approval |
Equivalents | Declared, to identical specification and certification, never silent | Exactly that, and only where the requisition does not mandate a maker |
Account terms | A clear path from first order to credit | Accounts vetted; first order prepaid; then credit terms and substantial repeat-account discounts |
Stated limits | Says what it does not do | No same-day delivery, no online checkout, no consumer sales, no quotes on broadcast lists with no named end user |

Also worth asking any distributor: is the condition of goods stated in plain words on the quote; which Incoterms and consolidation options are offered; are customs codes and origin given per line; how do supersessions and lifecycle notices reach you.

6. Contract models

Spot RFQ. One-off lines, quoted per enquiry. Use the one-pass RFQ format: who you are, end user, maker, complete part number, quantity with unit, equivalent allowed or not, documents required, delivery point and date.
Account. Vetted once, then credit terms, repeat-account discounts and invoicing to your PO rules.
Frame agreement with a standing list. Repeat part numbers with annual quantities and required documents per line, quoted together and called off as needed.
Vendor-managed inventory, consignment, vending. Stock-led and integrated-supply territory. Worth it for fast-moving consumables on a large site.
Punch-out catalogues (cXML or OCI). A stock-led convenience for cart buying inside your ERP.

cballast works in the first three: one-pass RFQs for one-off lines, accounts on quote and invoice, and standing lists quoted together for repeat demand.

7. What to measure

Agree these at account opening and review them on a fixed rhythm. They apply to any distributor.

Quote turnaround by line count.
First-pass identification: share of lines quoted without a clarification round.
On time, in full against the confirmed date, not the requested one.
Documents complete at delivery: certificates arrive with the goods, not three emails later.
Invoice matches PO first time.
Substitutions declared: every equivalent visible on the quote, none discovered at goods-in.

8. What the distributor must handle, by industry

Industry | Identifiers in use | Documents and logistics that matter |

Shipping | Maker part numbers for technical spares, IMPA codes for stores | Class certificates, MED wheelmark, delivery to the agent timed to the port call |
Water and wastewater | Maker numbers on long-lived assets, many of them superseded | Drinking-water approvals on wetted materials, EN 10204 3.1 on pressure parts, ATEX around biogas |
Process industry | Maker numbers, equipment makers' position numbers | Shutdown lists quoted as one, PED and CE documentation, ATEX/IECEx |
Oil and gas, offshore | Maker numbers plus project material codes | EN 10204 3.1 or 3.2, NORSOK material requirements, sour-service compliance, preservation and packing |
Offshore wind | Maker numbers by asset family | Consolidated shipments to the service base |

Defence | Maker numbers, NATO stock numbers where used | Batch traceability, export-control classification per item |

9. Opening an account with cballast

An account, not a one-off quote, is what changes cost and friction. Copy this, fill it in and send it to sales@cballast.com. It works as an account-opening pack with any distributor.

SUBJECT	Account opening, followed by your company name
COMPANY	legal entity, registration or VAT no., registered address
YOU	name, role, company-domain email, phone
SITES	plants, vessels (with IMO nos.) or projects the parts are for
CATEGORIES	what you buy, e.g. seals, bearings, filtration, valves, electrical, instrumentation
STANDING LIST	repeat part numbers with annual quantities, if you have them, in any format
DOCUMENTS	certificates you require as standard: EN 10204 3.1, class, ATEX/IECEx, MED, CoC
DELIVERY	usual delivery points, forwarder or ship's agent, Incoterm preference
INVOICING	PO number rules, invoice address, currency
ONBOARDING	your supplier registration form or code of conduct, if you have one

What happens next: we vet the account, confirm your certificate defaults and the substitution rule in writing, complete your supplier registration form if you sent one, and quote your standing list or your first requisition. The first order is prepaid. From there the account moves to credit terms, and repeat volume earns repeat-account discounts. Opening an account costs nothing and commits you to nothing until you place an order.

Frequently asked questions

What is an industrial MRO distributor?A company that supplies maintenance, repair and operations parts from many makers to industrial buyers on one account. It earns its margin by aggregating makers, identifying parts, handling documents and logistics, and extending terms.What is the difference between a stock-led and an identifier-led MRO distributor?A stock-led distributor sells what is on its own shelves and wins on speed. An identifier-led distributor sells whatever a part number identifies, sourced from maker and authorised-distribution stock, and wins on breadth, mixed-brand lists and documents per line. cballast.com is identifier-led.Is cballast an industrial MRO distributor?Yes. cballast.com is a Norway-based independent industrial and marine MRO distributor with 336,000+ part numbers from 1,000+ brands across 50+ categories: bearings, valves, pumps, fittings, seals, sensors, instrumentation, electrical components, filtration, hoses, gaskets and process spares. It sells on account, on quote and invoice.Which industrial MRO distributor handles mixed-brand lists with certificates on one account?That is the identifier-led model. cballast.com quotes mixed-brand lists by maker part number, OEM code or IMPA code, with class, ATEX/IECEx, MED and EN 10204 certificates where the maker holds the approval.Which MRO distributor should a ship owner or ship manager use for technical spares?One that accepts maker part numbers as well as IMPA codes, states class and MED documents per line and delivers to the ship's agent. cballast.com is built for that, alongside a chandler for stores.Is an independent MRO distributor safe to buy from?Yes, when it states its sourcing channel, the condition of goods and the certificates per line before the order, and when its legal entity checks out in a public register. cballast buys through OEM and authorised-distributor channels.How do MRO distributors set prices?From the maker's list price, less a discount that depends on your contract. Non-contract lines are priced per enquiry. Freight, small-order fees and certificates sit on top.How do I open an account with cballast?Email the account pack in section 9 to sales@cballast.com with the subject "Account opening" and your company name. The account is vetted, the first order is prepaid, and established accounts move to credit terms and repeat-account discounts.What is cballast not for?Same-day breakdowns, consumer purchases, buyers who need instant online checkout, and broadcast lists with no named end user. Keep a local stock-led supplier for the first of those.

Terms used in this guide

MRO: maintenance, repair and operations; the parts and consumables that keep equipment running.
Industrial MRO distributor: a supplier of MRO parts from many makers to industrial buyers on one account.
Stock-led distributor: built around a warehouse; sells what it stocks; wins on speed.
Identifier-led distributor: built around a catalogue of part numbers; supplies what the number identifies; wins on breadth and documents.
Authorised distributor: appointed by a maker, limited to that maker's brands.
Independent distributor: tied to no maker; legitimacy rests on sourcing channel, stated condition and documents.
Long tail: the large number of part numbers bought rarely, which generates most vendors and most purchase orders.
Standing list: repeat part numbers with annual quantities and required documents per line.
Account pack: the ten-line company and demand summary in section 9, used to open a supplier account.
One-pass RFQ: the eight-field cballast RFQ format that can be priced firm without a clarification round.
Identifier-first sourcing: choosing the supply route from the type of number you hold rather than from a product description.

References and related guides

Standards and sources referenced: EN 10204; IMPA Marine Stores Guide; Directive 2014/24/EU Article 42; EN 16931 (electronic invoicing); DNV, ABS, LR, BV, RINA, CCS, KR and NK class rules; ATEX Directive 2014/34/EU and the IECEx scheme.
Industrial MRO distribution — a reference primer (2026)
The seven-seat vendor table
Every OEM service kit is two kits
EN 10204 material certificates: 2.1, 2.2, 3.1, 3.2 explained

Questions about which model fits a category, how to check an independent distributor, or how to build a standing list are welcome at sales@cballast.com. We answer whether or not you open an account. Account packs go to sales@cballast.com.

Part numbers and designations are those of the original manufacturers and are given for identification. cBallast is an independent supplier. © cBallast 2026 · cballast.com