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The Official Publication of the Tree Care Industry Association

Volume XVIII, Number 10 - October 2007

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# Vehicle Safety and Your Bottom Line

By Paul Farrell

**T**he green industry represents an estimated 80,000 companies within the United States. While this estimate includes landscapers, arborists and support companies, all of these businesses have one thing in common: they must operate vehicles to get their teams to the work site.

Some companies operate only one or two vehicles, but the size of their fleet must grow along with their business operations. Regardless of fleet size, driving performance must be a key safety priority. Despite our best research, engineering and training efforts, vehicle crashes remain:

- ▶ The leading cause of workplace fatalities;
- ▶ The most costly lost-time workers' compensation injury; and
- ▶ One of the leading causes of off-the-job, unintentional injury.

## Counting the costs

Despite the emphasis placed on employee safety and crash prevention, crash costs are not completely covered by commercial insurance and affect company profits. Called indirect or out-of-pocket costs, these may include:

- ▶ deductibles;
- ▶ rental replacement costs that exceed the stated amount covered by your policy;
- ▶ any differential costs to upgrade equipment to current standards beyond covered replacement costs;
- ▶ potential lease penalties or lowered resale value of equipment;
- ▶ supervisory and crew lost time;
- ▶ customer dissatisfaction;
- ▶ potential increases in insurance costs if safety record judged "below average."

Consider the following regarding the true costs of vehicle accidents, based on TCIA's June 2007 *TreeWorker* newsletter (summarizing a TCIA survey):

Insurance covers the direct cost (vehicle



*Vehicle crashes are the leading cause of workplace fatalities and the most costly lost-time workers' compensation injury.*

replacement or repair, medical, workers' comp) of vehicle accidents, but not indirect costs (time spent investigating, loss of a client, crew downtime). The average direct cost of vehicle crashes was 67 percent of the total. (That leaves 33 percent as indirect costs.) The average total vehicular accident cost was \$14,592.

Beyond the dollars and cents, it is important to recognize that the operation of commercial vehicles is a highly visible symbol of the organization's commitment to quality, safety and even community service. Infrequent maintenance, poor equipment appearance and especially poor driving will call negative attention to these vehicles and consequently to your organization.

To protect employee welfare, contain costs, maximize operational "up-time" and maintain an excellent reputation within the communities your firm serves, a proper emphasis on fleet safety should be balanced among competing priorities. Establishing an effective, behavior- and results-based fleet safety program need not be a drain of time or resources on your budget.

Based on the recently released American National Standards Institute (ANSI) Z15.1 standard for vehicle safety programs, I offer the following five simple steps that

you can follow to assure success.

## Step One – Develop and communicate your driver safety policies.

Driver Safety policies address who is authorized to operate vehicles, how they will be qualified, what training they will receive, and for what purposes the vehicles may be driven.

Authorized drivers have agreed to:

- ▶ Sign a driver agreement stating that they will follow all safety policies and cooperate with safety instructions.

- ▶ Authorize the organization to obtain a Motor Vehicle Record from the state that issued their license in order to review any history of past tickets or police-reported collisions. (You should realize that these records will likely be introduced by a plaintiff's attorney following any serious crash involving your driver. Claiming that you were unaware of serious and numerous traffic offenses will not provide any defense in a courtroom situation.) If the history of tickets or crashes exceeds your benchmark standard, then the driver may not drive on behalf of the organization – no exceptions!

Your policies on driving need to be enforced. Someone within your organization will need to be responsible to ensure

that drivers are held accountable and, when infractions are found, some mechanism to dispense consequences should be in place. Careful construction of these policies may enable you to make use of existing disciplinary processes for enforcing the rules. This would increase the consistency of your management practices and save time in setting up your fleet safety program.

Most organizations designate a fleet safety coordinator to monitor the program, track statistics, file insurance claims, conduct training and monitor driver performance. This person should have the support of the president and other top management so that they can set direction and enforce the policies.

### Step Two – Carefully select and train your drivers

It's interesting to discover how many companies fail to mention driving as a key job duty in their job descriptions. It is a highly complex task with potential for injury, property damage and third party

involvements. Beyond job descriptions, background checks such as a basic review of past driving history (tickets and crashes) can go a long way to assuring that this employee can handle the driving in a competent manner. A driver's history can be obtained from the home state that issued their license, or through specialty vendors who can help you obtain information from various states through a single portal.

Once qualified, driver training can help familiarize the employee with policies, practices and proper driving technique under a wide range of circumstances, such as extreme weather conditions and highway versus rural roads. Most insurance carriers and agents have training resources available – sometimes for free or at a very low cost. Be sure to keep records of who received training and remember that training programs, no matter how well constructed, need to be repeated periodically to keep the information fresh in your employee's minds.

### Step Three – Monitor your drivers' performance.

Seasoned safety experts agree that training alone does not prevent accidents. People can know how to drive safely, but they don't always feel compelled to drive safely. A program to monitor drivers' performance gives the fleet safety coordinator feedback on who is adhering to the driver safety policies and who is using the training they've received.

A growing trend has been to utilize a safety hotline service that places a toll free hotline number on the vehicle to solicit feedback from motorists on driver performance. A pilot program to monitor driver performance, and using a hotline number on vehicles, was initiated by Bartlett Tree Experts' Southeast Region in January 2005.

Recently, Dave Marren, Bartlett's vice president of safety and regulatory affairs, wrote; "Bartlett employees are trained to think and act safely from their first day on the job. Through their comprehensive safe-



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ty-training program, Bartlett has developed corporate work practices designed for safe performance of arboriculture and to prevent accidents; however, we did not have a program in place to help us monitor the safety of our drivers.”

The strength of the program, Marren went on to say, is that it gets people thinking and talking about their driving behavior prior to an accident. Bartlett has continued

to roll out the program, ultimately including all vehicles in all its regions. “Based on the success of the program in its ability to warn us of potentially unsafe practices behind the wheel, we decided to add our corporate cars to the decal program,” Marren says.

“The reports that are automatically generated as part of the program are a valuable part of the process, alerting us to repeat offenders,” Marren says. Reports are distributed to the correct management team to address the behavior personally, prior to something more serious happening.

Common concerns raised about safety hotline program reports being nothing more than “crank calls” are often exaggerated, according to some of those who have used such programs. David Fleischner, president of Trees, Inc. in Houston, Texas, says; “Our concerns about false reporting from former employees and other disgruntled individuals were soon proven not to be a serious issue. Are there some false reports? There probably are, but our vehicle operators soon learned that other drivers would take the time to report reckless or discourteous behavior. And while one report could be labeled as a fluke, it proved other people were watching, and multiple reports from different people for the same behavior couldn’t be denied.”

“Not long into the program we started

seeing measurable results,” Marren says. “There is a definite sense of heightened safety awareness. The sticker on the back of the vehicle has the same effect on the operator as seeing the police car in the rear view mirror. A vehicle operator knows that if his behavior is not professional, all the person following them has to do is dial the phone.”

Finally, a good driver monitoring program should be designed to complement existing efforts on a long-term basis, not merely provide a one-time boost.

“Three years running and it is still producing favorable results,” confirms Andrew Salvadore, CSP, CTSP, safety compliance and training manager of Asplundh Tree Expert Company. “As a leading indicator of driving behaviors, it enables us to focus our loss prevention efforts.”

**Step Four – Make a plan to respond to crashes that may happen during the year**

The old adage, “an ounce of prevention beats a pound of cure” certainly applies to accident management. Training drivers on what to do following a traffic crash will help them gather needed information.

Crash reporting kits contain a report form that covers the essential information that a driver should gather following a crash – they are usually available from your insurance provider or can be ordered

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from TCIA (www.tcia.org).

The fleet safety coordinator should review all crashes to learn the cause, whether the crash was preventable (or avoidable), and what can be done to avoid

similar crashes in the future. One example of a guide to assist in determining accident preventability is available from the National Safety Council (www.nsc.org)

Step Five - Establish a vehicle inspection and maintenance program.

Vehicles must be inspected and maintained for safe operation. This policy covers general appearance and upkeep, periodic inspections for defects, and ongoing maintenance such as replacing air filters and checking air pressure in tires.

Dirty air filters can steal up to 10 percent of your engine's fuel efficiency, and improperly inflated tires lead to early replacement, blowouts and even worse fuel economy. If your drivers and mechanics are not routinely inspecting and maintaining your vehicles, your firm could be burning money and putting your employees at risk of injury!

### Summary

Fleet safety programs do not need to be complicated to be effective; however, they do need top management's sincere support, a coordinator to take charge, and consistent application of the policies. Ongoing driver training that is backed up by an effective monitoring program ensures that drivers both understand and practice the directions set out by the management policies. You'll get results when you apply effort and cre-

ate a sense of urgency to extend safety to the fleet.

There are many resources available to help set up your fleet safety program. The best place to start is your insurance provider, who has a sincere interest in your team's ability to avoid collisions.

*Paul Farrell is CEO of SafetyFirst Systems, LLC, an Associate Member, an affinity partner of TCIA, specializing in reducing commercial vehicle collisions through management information systems.*

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