

Driving Ambition



Keep your vehicles and drivers safe with a vehicle loss control program.

by **CONNIE TURNER**

FOR most horticultural businesses, vehicle safety is an important element of an overall safety program, since drivers, expensive equipment and valuable products are exposed to potentially devastating situations every day. The National Safety Council has found that 35 percent of all work-related fatalities and 10 percent of work-related disabling injuries are caused by motor vehicle accidents. Each year in the United States, motor vehicle accidents account for 43,500 deaths and 1.6 million disabling injuries. These accidents cost in excess of \$96.1 billion every year.

Instituting a vehicle loss control program is the best way to protect your vehicles, drivers and equipment. The program should focus attention on two primary accident factors: driver failure and vehicle failure.

A good vehicle loss control program begins with good drivers. In about 90 percent of all motor vehicle accidents, unsafe acts of drivers can be identified as the cause. Only 10 to 15 percent are due to mechanical failure. Safe vehicle operation is the result of planning and action, not chance. Experience has shown that driver failure can be controlled by a carefully planned program of driver selection, training and supervision.

Driver Selection

Effective driver selection begins by clearly defining the requirements of

the job. These should include the duties, physical and mental skills required and necessary education and training. Always use an application form, as it is the first source of information you have about a prospective new driver. The application form should include a release so you can check motor vehicle records and work references. References should be checked to verify information from the application and interview.

One of the most important references for a driver is the accident and conviction record kept by state motor vehicle authorities. These reports are often referred to as "MVR or DMV" checks. Statistics show that drivers with a poor accident or violation record are much more likely to have repeat accidents.

Finally, no employee who will drive, even occasionally, should be hired without a road test. Frequently, experienced applicants will have habits that need correcting. Assuming applicants can drive because they claim they have four years experience can be a costly error. All tests should be conducted using the type of equipment that the applicant will be driving if hired. Before beginning the test, check the applicant's license for validity and any restrictions.

Driver Training

Well-trained drivers are a profitable investment. They operate more efficiently, burn less fuel, wear out fewer tires and have fewer breakdowns on the road. They require less supervision because they know what they are supposed to do and how to do it. An untrained driver is an accident waiting to happen.

Initial training should be given to new personnel to get them properly indoctrinated prior to starting work. Even drivers with many years of experience

need orientation due to differences in types of cargo, vehicles and operations. Refresher training can be very useful for regular drivers to update information and maintain skills. Remedial training may be useful when there is a problem of substandard performance. The need for remedial training may be identified by customer complaints, complaints from the public, accident involvement, moving traffic violations or reports of vehicle misuse or abuse. Drivers must be shown the critical relationship between their actions and the success of the business. Effective training is the key to developing proper driver attitude.

Driver Supervision

The very nature of delivery fleet operation leaves drivers under their own supervision for a substantial portion of the workday. A critical element for a successful driver supervision program is establishing specific guidelines for job performance, including evaluation criteria, incentives and disciplinary procedures. These guidelines must be clearly understood by supervisors and drivers alike and applied equally to all drivers.

Most managers will have a fairly good idea of factors such as route or area that the vehicles will be using, number of miles for the route, average time required to complete the trip, loading arrangements and so on. These items can be supervised to a limited degree through random checks to verify that the driver is following the planned schedule. Close control of routing and scheduling make this supervision task easier. For example, be careful not to make routes too long, as this can cause a driver to speed between delivery points to complete the route in a reasonable time.

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Any company that employs drivers should be aware of the effects of fatigue and establish work hours accordingly. Particular attention should be paid if a driver's accident records indicate a frequency of accidents that could be fatigue related, such as running off the road and rear end and single vehicle accidents. During busy times of year, drivers are often required to work additional hours. Managers must watch for signs of fatigue among drivers and take action to prevent accidents. A good rule is to limit driving to 10 hours in any 24-hour period.

Using a road observation program will also allow managers to directly observe the actions of drivers, note condition of vehicles and identify road conditions along the route that can create hazards. This can be done through periodic check rides with each driver, which should be conducted at least once a year. This is a good opportunity to check the defensive driving habits of the driver and correct problems.

As noted earlier, drivers are left to their own supervision for much of the workday. Instituting a vehicle monitoring program is an effective way to get feedback about driver performance on the road. Place a decal on the back of your vehicles soliciting comments from motorists with a question such as, "How am I driving?" and provide an easy-to-remember, toll-free number for responses. Use a 24-hour service to screen calls for accuracy. After the information has been verified, an incident report will be immediately faxed to you in order for corrective measures to be taken.

A driver incentive program can also be a great way to encourage and reinforce positive behavior. Rewards can be given for accident-free driving, fuel-efficient driving or whatever else may be suitable. Awards should be given promptly, preferably by top management and in front of fellow employees.

Once all measures have been taken to ensure the safety and performance of your drivers, a well-managed maintenance program can protect the vehicles themselves. Reduced operational costs, reduced accidents from vehicle

defects and improved customer relations are the direct results of a well-implemented maintenance policy.

Successful fleet managers follow a preventative maintenance program that consists of daily vehicle checks by drivers and regular inspections by mechanics scheduled on a time or mileage basis. Depending on fleet size, there are several ways to organize a maintenance program. Preventative maintenance and minor repairs can be handled in-house, while major repairs are sent out, or all vehicle maintenance, including preventative, can be done outside. A person should be assigned to make sure maintenance schedules are followed and records are kept.

Implementing a comprehensive vehicle loss control program to prevent both driver and vehicle failure can save your business thousands of dollars and, more importantly, the lives of your employees. **GG**

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