

Truckers – there’s a time to text and a time to talk



TruckSure
By Trevor Toohill

I know I am meant to be talking about Insurance but from time to time other issues in the headlines deserve an airing. I guess the grey hair and the fact that I have been around the block a few times gives me a bit of credibility when it comes to discussing other issues that matter to the transport industry.

Driver shortages, young drivers and drivers jumping to a ‘greener paddock’ have all been the topic of a few words from me in the past and I know I have hit the spot judging by the feedback.

One of the big issues really gets back to how well we all communicate and perhaps a big reason that we see the revolving door of drivers moving around the industry is because drivers and transport operator companies don’t talk.

I know this as I have been called to arbitrate, on more than a few occasions, between disputing parties, when all it would have taken was a couple of well planned meetings face to face early on.

There is only so much that you can communicate by text or email but nothing does it better than a one on one.

On a visit recently to the transport depot of one of our largest trucking fleet operators I needed to meet with a couple of owner drivers and arranged to catch up with them in the driver cafeteria, an area of the building next to the main headquarters and dispatch office. I had to wait a couple of minutes while one of the drivers finished off a lengthy text message. He finally finished his ‘conversation’ and explained that he was ‘talking’ to his dispatch manager in the next building - someone he had never met!

A lot of employee drivers felt the company didn’t view them as good enough to walk into the main head office building and talk to someone face-to-face, not the best feeling for someone to have if you want them to stick around. And while cell phones and in-cab communications systems are a reality of life when it comes to drivers and dispatchers communicating, it works a lot better when you have actually met the person on the other end of the line.

It also needs to be said that probably the job with the highest pressure in the industry would belong to the dispatcher. So a little understanding between the two vital components of transport – drivers and dispatchers – goes a long way.

Reminds me of a yarn you may well have heard before: “An old driver got to the pearly gates of heaven and was welcomed by St Peter, who told him how much the big guy appreciated all his hard work over the years getting the freight there on time and watching out for all the motorists on the road. St Peter showed the trucker over the most magnificent fleet of trucks he had ever seen.

The driver climbed in and out of all the trucks, admired the chrome, leather upholstery and the lights, then came back to St Peter and asked, “When do I get to drive one of these? That’s the problem, son,” St Peter said. “We have plenty of drivers up here, but we don’t have any dispatchers.”

When it comes to slowing down the revolving door of drivers, no one is as important as the person who deals with those drivers day in and day out. Yet far too many companies throw former drivers or other staff into that role perhaps with little thought as to their communication and relationship abilities.

Ask any trucking executive if he or she has an open-door policy, where drivers could come to them with problems, and chances are the answer will be yes. In reality, however, the open door needs to be between the driver and the dispatcher.

The driver’s relationship with that frontline organiser is vital, possibly even more important to the driver than their pay rate.

When I listen to the owners of companies that enjoy low turnover, I hear plenty about the importance of the relationship between drivers and the people they interact with at the company – none of them more important than their dispatcher. These fleets do things like having the driver and his dispatcher eat lunch together during orientation for the sole purpose of getting to know the driver on a personal level. They give their dispatchers training in topics such as communication and conflict resolution, and it is not unusual for the dispatcher to accompany the driver on an occasional delivery run.

All this requires a corporate attitude that drivers are important. The message coming out of the company office that sets the tone of driver respect, and communication is more important than having an ‘open door’.

It is also a two way street where both the driver and the dispatcher gain mutual respect for each other and their respective roles. **TS**



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