

# THE SIX POINT PLAN

Success doesn't happen by accident:  
plan your work and work your plan

By Joanne Ritchie

**W**hen I start haranguing truck drivers about seeking out the 'good' carriers and stop keeping the bad apples in business, I often get challenged by those who tell me all carriers are the same, and defy me to read the recruiting ads and tell them the difference.

And I agree, it can be a frustrating exercise trying to compare one carrier's offerings to another, and sure, there are still some genuinely rotten carriers out there who thrive on exploiting less-than-savvy drivers, but I believe they're fewer in number than many might think.

In fact, I think the light is coming on for more carriers every day. There is a growing number who realize that the business-as-usual mind-set just isn't going to cut it anymore, and many are shifting their focus from recruiting to retention.

If the winds of change are blowing in a new breed of carrier, it's more important than ever that owner-operators are up to the challenge and ready to bring their best business practices to the table. When I ask the most successful owner-operators I know what those best practices are, these are six that top the list:

## KNOW YOUR COSTS

Well-run businesses should operate

at a profit, and that begins with knowing and doing everything possible to control and manage costs. Lower costs translate into higher profit margins; charge enough to cover your costs and to earn a profit on each load. There's no such thing as a backhaul rate, so don't haul freight that doesn't pay what you need. That said, make sure your costs are realistic. Nobody's going to pay more to compensate for inefficiencies like poor fuel economy.

## DON'T HAUL CHEAP FREIGHT

Run your truck like a business, with profitability and sustainability as your goals. Make a business plan and stick to it; just make sure you've built in the flexibility to make the oft-required mid-course corrections and adjustments. But go only so far – rate cuts and clawbacks of fuel surcharges, for example, are not in the plan, especially today. If the partner isn't prepared to pay enough, just walk away.

## GET IT IN WRITING

A good contract is one of your key tools. The terms of the business relationship should always be spelled out in the contract, whether it's with a shipper or a carrier. Outside of a contract, there are no laws protecting you from unscrupulous business associates, so don't leave anything to chance in terms of unplanned changes or impromptu deductions from a settlement. Owner-ops don't have the same

rights under labour law that company drivers have, so make sure the contract covers all the bases and protects your interests too.

## RUN COMPLIANT

It's safer, cheaper, and less stressful in the long run. And with HOS in particular, it just doesn't make sense to keep reinforcing the reprehensible habit of giving away your time. And that's exactly what you're doing every time you adjust your logbook to compensate for screw-ups or poor planning. You can't complain about unpaid delays at the same time you're hiding the hours. It's only when those hours gets logged where they should that carriers and their customers will have no choice but to ante up. 'Nuf said.'

## KNOW THE SECTOR YOU WORK IN

There's freight out there paying two, three bucks a mile, sometimes as high as five bucks or better, if you know where to find it. The real pros know the markets they work in and they follow the good paying freight. Are you likely to get a good reefer load out of Campbellton? Probably not, so the rate into Campbellton had better be sufficient to cover the empty miles back to greener pastures. All that comes from knowing and understanding the sector you work in. Watch, listen, read – keeping on top of things is a continuous learning process.

## LOOK BEFORE YOU LEAP

You've got to know when it's time to move on. There's lots of freight to move, and there are lots of good carriers out there moving it. Compare apples with apples when you're looking at carrier operations and pay pack-

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ages. Interview them with a list of questions that will help you make an informed choice – and don't sign on until you have the answers you need.

We can debate the definition of 'good' and 'bad' when we're talking about carriers and owner-operators, but 'bad' in my books certainly includes those who don't take the business part of trucking seriously enough. So set your standards high, aim for success, and don't settle for less. ☺

*Joanne Ritchie is executive director of OBAC. Do you know what's good for you?*

*E-mail her at [jritchie@obac.ca](mailto:jritchie@obac.ca) or call toll free 888-794-9990.*