



Just who is this OBAC crowd?

by Joanne Ritchie

Many metaphors have been burned in pursuit of clarifying a name, but there's no clearer way to define the **Owner-Operator's Business Association of Canada**. The name says it all. Still, there are lingering doubts as to its real agenda. Past experiences with 'owner-operator associations' have left a bad taste in some mouths – even among owner-operators.

To clarify: OBAC is not a rag-tag populist group, nor is it a one-hit wonder, thrown together in the heat of a crisis to deal with a single issue. OBAC is out to help owner-operators do a better job of managing their businesses, with the ultimate objective being a more profitable owner-operator, and a work environment where both a decent income and job satisfaction are possible.

We want to get past the age-old labour/management mentality that has hamstrung the independent contractors in this country for years. There is value in establishing solid relationships with viable business partners. Reliable, service-oriented owner-operators bring talent and experience to a carrier's team. Carriers who view owner-operators as an integral part of their business, rather than as dispensable commodities and/or profit centres, will be better able to serve shippers who are demanding long-term service commitments.

We know that in both camps – carriers and owner-operators – there are those who refuse to recognize the value of a sustainable relationship. We'll be working to change that point of view. We believe more can be achieved by working together than

by building walls. We're looking for carrier partners to advance the owner-operator cause. A financially viable owner-operator will be in business next month, next year, and many years after that: when the owner-operator is making money, so is the carrier.

There's little to be gained in bemoaning bad custom and practice that has crept into the carrier/owner-operator relationship over the years, if you're not prepared to do something about it. And some things simply need to change. For example, carriers who refuse to pass along the collected fuel surcharge to their sub-contractors are robbing the owner-operators of their ability to manage unpredictable operating costs. The result is a shaky business partner who may not be around in a year – so what's the point of driving your partners out of business? That's pretty short-term thinking.

OBAC is encouraging its members to develop a better understanding of how the surcharge mechanism works, basing surcharge calculations on the Freight Carriers Association (FCA) recommendations, the same approach carrier associations are urging their members to take. We're also suggesting owner-operators incorporate fuel surcharge clauses in carrier/owner-operator contracts, rather than rely on shipper/carrier arrangements to offset fluctuating fuel costs. That's just good business sense.

OBAC also recognizes that many owner-operators need to sharpen their business skills, so we're developing a suite of products to help them do just that – to understand costs, margins,

accessorial charges – and to view their contract as an essential tool in building a sound partnership with their carrier or customer. We'd like to see business-savvy owner-operators refusing to work with the so-called bad apples of trucking – the same outfits that reputable carriers are forced to compete with; the same outfits that exploit our members and keep freight rates too low to cover costs.

When it comes to the many issues facing this industry, there are surprisingly few where owner-operators and carriers actually take opposing sides – too few to mention, really. So, in its advocacy role, OBAC's presence at the various tables can only help strengthen industry's position. Carriers and owner-operators all have a stake in how this industry functions and how it is regulated, and no one will be well served by presenting a single point of view.

So when someone wonders what OBAC is up to, you can believe it when we say we're about strengthening the owner-operator population with a view to making the whole industry healthier – healthy owner-operators, healthy carriers, a healthy industry. We all benefit from that. If you're still uncertain about OBAC's intentions, just watch us – and get on board if you like what you see. ●

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