



Owner-Operator's Business
Association of Canada

Association professionnelle des
routiers autonomes du Canada

*...from the
director's chair*

Green is the new gold

You shouldn't need me to tell you there are some serious gains to be made in adopting an aggressive fuel conservation strategy. Call it going green if you want – and what marketer or politician isn't playing the green card these days – but there are some smart folks in trucking who are finding ways of spinning all that green into gold.

You can roll your eyes at tree-hugging trucking, and there are still those who think climate change is some kind of conspiracy, but there is no question that reducing fuel consumption reduces greenhouse gas emissions. Let's face it, saving the planet is not the trucking industry's highest priority at the moment, but simply put, going green saves you money. That's the great thing about it: while you're putting money in your jeans, you can't help but do the atmosphere a favour in the process.

Earlier this month, the US EPA SmartWay Transport Partnership and a host of Canadian organizations teamed up for a joint conference that got to the nitty-gritty of return on investment for greening your fleet. The two-day forum brought industry professionals from Canada and the US together to explore some very practical and money-making solutions to managing energy efficiency in on-road transportation.

The program went well beyond lectures about investing in idle-reduction technology and slowing down to save fuel, although those tools played a big part in some of the more comprehensive strategies presenters shared with us. All of the speakers were quite open and frank, some surprisingly so.

For example, David Konopka, director of quality for A.D. Transport Express, a Michigan-based auto parts hauler, described the more or less accidental discovery he made that more than a quarter of his 500-truck fleet was idling 50% of the time; some had idle rates as high as 69%.

That's an extraordinary admission, really.

The problem? Trucks idling on-site in hot and cold weather awaiting dispatch orders from the fleet's principle customer. The solution? A fleet full of freshly installed APUs that's making Konopka pretty happy. Now it's on to the next step: working with the customer to improve logistics for an even more significant payback.

The other end of the spectrum is the great lengths US truckload giant J.B. Hunt goes to in analyzing and justifying a gain in efficiency or reduction in operating costs before they spend dime one. The company's senior vice-president of engineering services, Gary Whicker, explained that defining the problem is critical to finding the right solution.

If efficiency improvements are necessary on certain lanes, the company might propose a simple improvement in fuel economy, then undertake a detailed analysis of how to achieve those gains and what it would cost. Or they'll look at an increase in payload (a revenue gain), and weigh that against the barriers posed by weights and dimensions regulations. And they could also look at reducing mileage by refining logistics in an effort to minimize deadhead and empty miles.

That obviously requires a little more effort than just hanging an APU on a truck – in fact, an APU might not be a solution at all, any more than improved aerodynamics might have helped A.D. Transport Express.

The point is that no one is doing these things just for the green of it. These are first and foremost business decisions and any fleet or individual truck owner wants to see a solid return on investment for any efforts they undertake.

The truth is, not all solutions will work effectively in every application – except



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one. As far as I'm concerned, Andy Roberts of B.C.'s Mountain Transport Institute made that pretty clear in his presentation on the value of driver training in the fuel-efficiency equation.

At the end of the day, all those investments in idle-reduction technology, speed management programs, logistics planning, and spec'ing a truck to the nth degree for fuel economy, could be lost if the driver doesn't understand or isn't aware of how to drive for dollars. Driver training solutions designed to enhance fuel consumption reduction techniques are ultimately more cost effective and usually produce lasting results – especially if the fleet is prepared to reward its drivers for improved performance.

But here's the kicker. Even though we know incentive programs offer fleets an innovative and progressive way to achieve fuel performance goals, research conducted recently by eyefortransport revealed that only 11% of the fleets surveyed have fully maintained incentive schemes in place. And while a few offer some kind of ad hoc incentive, and a few more are giving it some thought, 42% of the fleets have no plans for implementing incentive programs.

So while it's very cool to see a roomful of carriers listening to, sharing, and getting excited about each other's ideas, we need to find some way to spell it out for the 90% of the industry who just doesn't get it. I mean, how many ways can you spell cha-ching?