



Owner-Operator's Business
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*...from the
director's chair*

Beep beep!: Too close for comfort

Driver assist systems still need to work

Advanced technology that can prevent crashes may be a dream come true, but if you're asleep at the wheel, and that technology isn't on your truck, you may never wake up.

That fact was hammered home this past summer when a number of horrendous crashes took place within a few weeks of each other in Southern Ontario. It started with a pair of serious truck crashes on Hwy. 402; one driver was killed when his parked truck was rear-ended by another in a three-truck chain reaction collision. Days later in the same location, near the Blue Water Bridge in Sarnia, a three-truck pileup caused one truck to flip onto its side, tying up traffic for hours. Fortunately, there were no fatalities in that one.

Less than a week after that, two more people died in a chain reaction crash involving a couple of empty dump trucks, a straight truck, and a passenger car on Hwy. 48 near Sutton. And not long after that, two people were hospitalized after the taxi they were riding in was rammed from behind by a transport truck.

While the spotlight was on Southern Ontario, these types of crashes happen everywhere, every day, and the cost is enormous. Every one of the collisions I mentioned could have been avoided or greatly minimized had the trucks involved been equipped with a forward-looking collision mitigation system.

This technology, known as ADAS (advanced driver assistance system) is currently available from Bendix, Meritor Wabco, or Daimler, but some variation of these systems has been available for close to a decade now. In recent years the systems have been refined

and focused to a much higher degree, making them more effective and supposedly less intrusive for drivers.

But even with the recent improvements, fleets and owner-operators are still not widely embracing these potentially life-saving options. Judging the age of the trucks from newspaper photos, the option would have been available at the time the vehicles in the Ontario accidents were put into service. So why didn't those fleets, or for that matter, any fleet or owner-operator today, spec' ADAS?

Cost is a bit of a barrier, at something north of a couple of thousand dollars. For that kind of money a buyer would expect something in return, but it's difficult to gauge the ROI on such a device if, for example, a fleet or owner-operator has never had a serious rear-end collision. Of course all it takes is one – at a cost of perhaps several million dollars. In that scenario, a few thousand to save a few million could be seen as a tremendous ROI.

The second reason is the annoyance factor. I've heard from drivers that these systems can misinterpret a "target" and cause false alarms and even brake applications for no apparent reason. At times, it's because the sensors are not precisely focused. Sometimes it's a matter of the device getting confusing signals and responding inappropriately. In other situations, drivers were indeed operating too close to the target and the system responded as it should, much to the annoyance of the driver.

The systems are configured to trigger a warning when a pre-set following distance has been compromised. In heavy traffic, I know it can be very difficult to maintain such



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a space cushion, which is likely why drivers get those oft-reported annoying warnings. If the systems could be tuned to allow less of a following distance in heavy traffic, while looking further down the road to detect the distracted or asleep-at-the-wheel high-speed approaches into stopped or slowed traffic, drivers and fleets might not so quickly disregard the technology. Some kind of user interface where the sensitivity can be dialed back, at least temporarily, when the driver is alert and trying to navigate through dense traffic, might help.

ADAS technology has already proven its effectiveness. It has prevented or mitigated hundreds if not thousands of crashes already. We know it works, and governments and insurance companies know it works.

So where are the incentives to get the non-believers onboard? Are mandates the answer? At this point in time, customers still have a choice, although some OEMs have made such systems standard equipment, which is a step in the right direction.

I'd like to believe that a few improvements to technology with such crash-reduction potential would increase driver buy-in and tip the scales in favor of a system on every truck. I'd sure feel safer on the road if I knew ADAS had my back.

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