

# Don't Be Held Hostage

Strategies for pulling wrecker bills down.

By Larry Cole

Guest Writer

The driver loses control of his rig on a rain slick road and his tractor trailer begins sliding as if on ice into the median of the interstate highway. Fortunately, the driver maintains his steering but he buries the truck's tires and semitrailer. Nobody is hurt. A state trooper arrives quickly, blue lights flashing.

The trooper calls in a tow company before he ventures in the mud to the truck driver. When the wrecker arrives, one man does the job and before you know it, the rig is being towed to a near-by storage facility.

The driver calls in and visits with the dispatcher on duty and is told to stay with the rig. At some point in the process, usually after the tractor trailer rig is parked in the storage facility, an invoice appears on the fax machine at the trucking company three states away. The amount due is a paltry \$6,000, payable in cash.

The wrecker company advises that the rig will remain in its possession until paid in full. Everybody complains but after a few hours, it is clear that the carrier is powerless to do anything but pay the bill.

It is an old story heard many times. Wrecker companies are in the cat bird seat and their owners know it. Most of them are honest and charge a fair fee for the work they do. And then there are the few who treat the job as if it is a kidnapping, complete with a ransom note in the form of an invoice.

For years in our industry I have heard statements like "Our wrecker bills are killing us," or "We got ripped off again by a wrecker company last night," or "The police made us use the wrecker service they called." After years of being on call 24/7, a late night telephone ring would always flip the switch to my brains

internal rotating flashing orange beacon and alert my not yet fully awake senses to the possibility that the call I was receiving might somehow involve the use of a wrecker.

Having asked many a driver to "run that by me again" as I fumbled to turn on the light, I can remember wishing just one time, just one time, how I would like to hear that it would be a white car that ran our driver off the road instead of the dreaded phantom red one.

Whenever I would hear the driver say, "Someone ran my truck off the road," I would always ask "well were you in it or was your truck unoccupied when it was run off the road by the red car of which you did not get the license plate number?" The reality of the moment was that I needed the driver to accept responsibility for his/her actions.

I also knew that I would be accountable to the owner of my company for how I handled the task that lay before me. Blaming a law enforcement entity or blaming an unscrupulous wrecker company was not one of my options when I had to explain a four or five digit wrecker bill at my weekly review board meeting.

For those of you within a trucking company that are charged with making decisions that involve the use of a wrecker, you can control your costs. Please allow me to share with you some of my experience based processes on how to curb your wrecker expenses.

## Establish written guidelines

Designate someone within your company on all shifts to address all wrecker issues. Publish it to all drivers and all support personnel who you have designated. There should never be any question as to who authorized what. Set up a damage control or crises management team and use it.

Create and publish a basic Trucking 101 type publication. Title it, "What to Do When You Need a Wrecker." Think of every conceivable situation where you might need a wrecker, i.e., accident, incident, rollover, stalled vehicle, running off travel surface, hazardous weather situations, etc. Identify all of the company players. List the responsibility of each person. Knowing what your teammate is doing helps in this wrecker game. You cannot expect what you are not willing to inspect. I have said for years that we as an industry do a poor job of training our drivers and support staff as to our company expectations.

Training starts in orientation and should never stop. It is too late in most cases when the driver calls and says, "I need a ComCheck for a wrecker." Train your drivers on what to do. Train your support staff on how to determine your wrecker needs. A severe accident such as a rollover does not necessarily mean calling out an entire fleet of wreckers.

Send designated personnel to a crash site. On the job training for your staff will save you money.

## Emergency...or not

Adhere to some basic guidelines when you receive one of those emergency calls. In most cases, the situation will justify as an emergency. However, the situation may not be and you must gauge the situation as one or the other based on your evaluation of the facts.

Early on in an emergency call, gather as many facts as you can to determine what I call the "sense of urgency gauge." If your emergency involves injuries, take care of that first.

The lesser the degree of urgency to move your vehicle, the longer the time you have to negotiate with a wrecker company. This proves the cliché that time

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## HOSTAGE,

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is money.

If your driver is not injured, they should become your eyes and ears at a crash site.

Contact the law enforcement dispatcher in the area where the accident occurred. Identify yourself and explain the reason for your call. Ask for the name and mobile number of the officer in charge. You can explain that you may have to fulfill Federal DOT requirements and you might need the help of the officer on the scene. Get creative; say something to let him know you have a reason for calling him. Establish a dialogue with the officer in charge.

Determine if a wrecker company has already been dispatched by the police. If so, get the name and a contact person for the wrecker company. Most likely, when an accident occurs on a public highway the police will make the call.

In any case, immediately contact the wrecker company and ask for the owner or supervisor on duty. Let them know that it is your money that will be paying for their bill. If you self-insure, it's your money. If you have first dollar insurance coverage, it is still your money. If you have an insurance deductible, it's still your money. Any way you pay for it, it is still your money. Let them know you also expect them protect your equipment and cargo during the recovery process.

If the accident means getting your insurance company involved, find out the name and phone number of the adjuster. Let him/her know right away that you expect them to help curb your costs and help you preserve the integrity of any salvageable equipment and cargo. Insurance adjusters and insurance companies enjoy the luxury of writing from your open checkbook. They will never protect your money the way you would.

When you establish contact with a wrecker company ask for their hourly rate. Ask how many employees and how many pieces of equipment do they expect to use at the scene. Ask what their hourly rate is for their employees other than the wrecker driver. Ask your driver to give you a mental picture of what is going on.

A wrecker company will often have more staff and equipment on the scene than necessary. Tell the wrecker com-

pany representative to send back to his yard what you feel is not needed to clean up your emergency. Start negotiating. Continue to negotiate throughout the duration of the emergency. Now is the window of opportunity for you to save money. You will be surprised just how much you can save by practicing good old-fashioned horse trading. Take charge and stay in charge.

Once you reach an agreed price, make sure the wrecker company sends you a fax confirming the pricing. You may run into a situation where you are not being pressed to move your equipment, but the police have already called a wrecker. If the wrecker company they call will not lower their pricing for you, then call another wrecker company and start negotiating. Tell the police what you are doing; why you are doing it. Give them an estimate as to when you expect the equipment to be removed from the area.

Remember, round numbered estimates from a wrecker company should tell you there is room for horse-trading. Sometimes we have not and get not because we ask not. Ask them to cut their pricing. Tell them you know this will not be the last time you will need a wrecker in their area and that you might want to use them again if their pricing is right.

In this day of unlimited communication resources, there should never be any excuse or reason why a designated company support staff member cannot get immediately involved with wrecker situations. It does not matter if it was the police that made the call or your own people that made the call for the wrecker, you always have to make the effort to negotiate. If you at least make the call, sometimes you can pull them in your direction before they get a chance to hook up to you.



*Larry Cole is founder and President of Trucking Experts, Inc., a consulting firm that specializes in providing loss control, risk management, and cost efficiency strategies for trucking companies. He is an exclusive consultant to enrolled companies in the ATA Self-Insurers' Fund. Cole has worked as a Manager of Safety and Compliance, Director of Safety and Recruiting, Terminal Manager, Vice President of Safety and Recruiting, Special Projects Coordinator Mexican Driver Project, and Vice President of Fleet Operations and Security for a company in Kuwait and Iraq.*