

TOWING & RECOVERY FOOTNOTES

Website WISDOM Pg 14

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Weathering The Storm

How to stay afloat in a sea of economic uncertainty

By J. Tol Broome, Jr.

Storms are always difficult. They are often unexpected, ill-timed, and unpredictable. They can cause damage in a number of ways, and the longer they last, the more damage they do.

Economic downturns are a lot like storms. And we are in the middle of a prolonged financial storm right now. While some economists still refuse to use the R-word, many small business owners certainly feel recessionary pressures. Although the numbers have been changing often, both up and down, consider these recent U.S. economic headlines in 2008:

- Existing home sales reach 10-year low
- Home prices drop by the highest rate ever
- Bank repossessions rise 184 percent over 2007
- Inflation reaches highest levels in a generation
- Auto sales plunge to 16-year low
- Unemployment rates approach six percent

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Jon Hallock

- Bear market becomes official on Wall Street with a 20-percent drop
- Oil prices near \$150 dollars a barrel
- The U.S. dollar weakens
- Bank credit availability tightens
- Weak economy likely to persist into 2009

Of course, you can weather any storm if you take the right actions once it hits. And the same holds true for surviving an economic slump. As you try to keep your head above water while the storm rages around you, follow these six steps to significantly improve your chances of being in business when the sun finally comes out.

Assess Your Business Model. This may sound counter-intuitive, but an economic storm is a good time to assess your business model. Why? It has been said that when the tide goes out, we find out who has been swimming naked.

In a period of strong economic growth, even mediocre businesses can

thrive. But when things get tough as they are now, those with a weak business model struggle and often don't survive. First, ask yourself some hard questions:

- Is my business location optimal?
- Am I still meeting the needs of my customers?
- Do I have the right product mix?
- Do my price points make sense relative to the market?
- Do I have the right people in place to help me survive now and thrive later?
- Is my cost structure too high?
- Am I doing better or worse than my competitors?
- Can I make enough money from this business to justify the time and effort I devote to it?
- What should I be doing that I am not doing? What should I stop doing that I am doing now?
- Should I consider other sources of revenue generation, such as online marketing (see pg. 14)?

Second, you must be willing to make some difficult decisions if your towing and recovery business model is not on the right long-term course. If you are struggling to stay afloat but refuse to consider any changes to your business model, you will find it very difficult to weather the storm. But if you are willing to ask the tough questions and act accordingly to change course, it might just be the difference between going under and survival.

Seek Professional Input. When times get tough, it is sometimes difficult for the towing and recovery business owner to decide unilaterally on the right track for survival. This is a good time for you to seek outside counsel from trusted advisors.

Start with your Certified Public Accountant. Your CPA should be familiar with the financial strengths and weaknesses of your business and can provide valuable input to improve sales, increase margins, and cut costs.

A second good source for counsel is your attorney. In addition to legal knowledge and advice, many attorneys have experience in advising clients on business management issues. And if you are receiving frequent calls from creditors or find that you are falling behind in keeping your taxes current, your attorney will ensure that you understand where you stand legally.

Another source of input can come from your business contacts. You should know other small business owners in the community — and not just other towers — who would be willing to provide advice on dealing with the financial problems you face.

See WEATHERING THE STORM, page 5

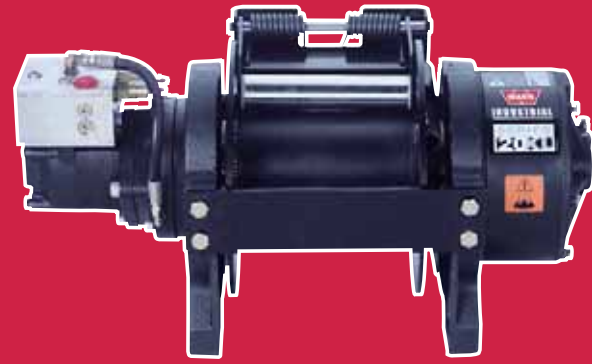
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Brain Stormin
with stormin' norman

Leaving The Nest

*Don't just sit there, stand up
for what's right*

By Norman Horton

For years I have been tilting at wind-mills. I think one of the things that probably inspired me was an article written years ago by the editor of *Bodyshop* magazine called "A Salute To The Unreasonable Man." I have long since lost the article, but it was probably based on this quote by George Bernard Shaw: "The reasonable man adapts himself to the world; the unreasonable one persists in trying to adapt the world to himself. Therefore all progress depends on the unreasonable man."

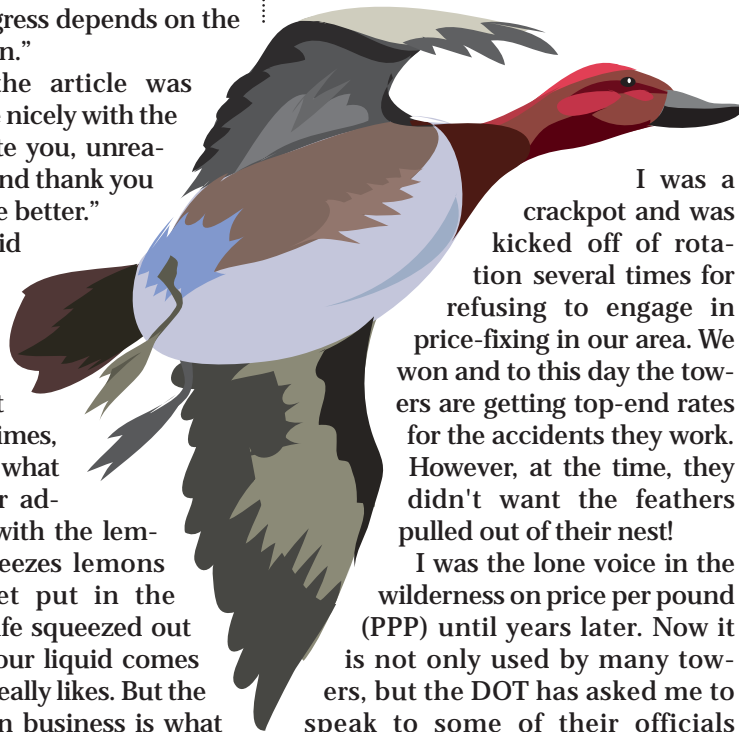
The rest of the article was summed up quite nicely with the following: "I salute you, unreasonable people, and thank you for making my life better."

It has been said that that which does not kill you can only serve to make you stronger. That holds true sometimes, but it depends on what you do with your adversity. The guy with the lemonade stand squeezes lemons all day. They get put in the hopper, get the life squeezed out of them, and a sour liquid comes out that nobody really likes. But the reason he stays in business is what he does with that juice.

When a mother bird has her young, she builds a nest out of sticks and twigs and lines it with feathers, and then she finds the food and brings it back to her young. What a life! Sitting in a

down featherbed getting fed with nary a care in the world. But then she starts pulling the feathers out and making life uncomfortable. Then, to add insult to injury, she finally kicks them out of the nest!

There have been many positions I have taken throughout my career in this industry, in my personal life, and some in my other businesses that have made the nest uncomfortable for either myself or my readers or the people on the other side of the equation



I was a crackpot and was kicked off of rotation several times for refusing to engage in price-fixing in our area. We won and to this day the towers are getting top-end rates for the accidents they work. However, at the time, they didn't want the feathers pulled out of their nest!

I was the lone voice in the wilderness on price per pound (PPP) until years later. Now it is not only used by many towers, but the DOT has asked me to speak to some of their officials about the system (but you know how fast our government moves...). I have also spoken up against abuses both within and outside of the industry.

Each time the feathers were pulled

out of my nest, we took a long hard look at our situation and made the tough decisions. Four years ago we sold our towing business — turns out the timing was great, and I have no regrets since I am married to my wife, not my tow trucks. Twenty-plus years is a long time in a tow truck, and I want my legacy to be with my family, not that I died in my tow truck.

Have I had to pay a price? Yes, you always have to pay a price for taking a stand. There's always a price for going boldly where no man has gone before — like the Internet auction we attempted recently (a heartfelt thanks to those who stuck their necks out to participate).

If you realize your risks up front and are willing to go forward, there is much to be learned, if not gained. Risk is always risky. But if you crank that lemonade machine you might, just might, end up with a pretty good lemonade stand, and maybe, if you experiment, a new flavor you never thought of.

Soar or sour — it's each towers' choice.

The views expressed in this column each month are the opinion of the author alone and do not necessarily represent the editorial position of this publication.

Eyecatching Man

A man is dining in a fancy restaurant and there is a gorgeous redhead sitting at the next table. He has been checking her out since he sat down, but lacks the nerve to talk with her.

Suddenly she sneezes, and her glass eye comes flying out of its socket toward the man. He reflexively reaches out, grabs it out of the air, and hands it back.

"Oh my, I am so sorry," the woman says as she pops her eye back in place. "I'm sure that must have embarrassed you, so let me pay for your dinner to make it up to you."

They enjoy a wonderful dinner together, and afterwards they go to the theatre. They talk, they laugh, she shares her deepest dreams, and he listens, he shares his, and she listens.

After paying for everything, she asks him if he would like to come to her place for a nightcap and stay for breakfast. They have a wonderful time, and the next morning, she cooks a gourmet breakfast with all the trimmings. The guy is amazed and totally impressed.

"You know," he said, "you are the perfect woman. Are you this nice to every guy you meet?"

"No," she replied. "You just happened to catch my eye."

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SHORT HAULS

Industry people, news, shows, awards, and more

Email your company press releases, news items, and other information to the editor at bcandler@traderonline.com with any available photos and art.



The best decorated in the Tow Trucks For Tots parade

Tow Trucks For Tots. Though they didn't break the world record for the number of tow trucks in a parade, Illinois towers brightened the holidays for a lot of children. During the first Tow Trucks for Tots event on Nov. 9, 239 tow trucks formed an eight-mile parade and participants donated enough toys to fill three dump trucks and two moving vans. The toys were given to the Chicagoland Toys for Tots parade. The event was organized by



Ready to parade for Toys For Tots

Worldwide Equipment Sales and plans for a second event are already in the works. Visit their website at www.TowTrucksForTots.com.

Man Pleads "Not Guilty" In NY Tow Truck Driver's Death. On Nov. 17, 64-year old David Brown of Cheektowaga, N.Y. entered a not-guilty plea in the death of 28-year old Kevin Coffta. Coffta, who worked for Marty's Towing Service of Grand Island, was killed on April 2 after Brown's SUV veered off the road, striking him. Though his SUV flipped and landed on its roof, Brown only suffered minor injuries. Brown, who was indicted for vehicular manslaughter, criminally negligent homicide, and driving while intoxicated, was allowed to remain free on \$25,000 bail.

CA Tow Truck Driver Seriously Injured. Richard Castro, 28, was injured in mid-November on the side of Interstate 680 in Danville, Ca. when he was struck by a truck driven by an allegedly intoxicated person. Castro, a driver for Save Tow of San Ramon, was assisting a disabled vehicle when he was hit.



towPartners Releases Free Software. On Nov. 18, towPartners announced that it has released a free truck-maintenance tracking software for all of its members which is now available at www.towfleet.com. The towFleet system has been in use by approximately 100 companies in a testing phase which was recently completed and the application is now available to the entire towing industry through towPartners.

towFleet is a web-based software tool that offers features without any investment by towing, repossession,

and road service companies who are members of towPartners. According to towPartners, everyone from small wrecker companies to full-scale towing and recovery operations with diverse capabilities can benefit from towFleet, featuring maintenance planning, cost tracking, reporting, fuel management and other items.

Extrication Fest! Registration is underway for Extrication Fest! 2009. This year, the event will be held Feb. 27 to Mar. 1 in the Will Rogers Coliseum in downtown Fort Worth, Tex. For more information on classes, exhibitors, accommodations and online registration, visit www.midsouthrescue.org.

Truck Tips Contest. Got a good tip to share about safety, health or saving money while on the road? Submit your best one online at Progressive Truck Tips website at <http://www.progressivetrucktips.com/> by March 31 and you might have a shot at a \$5,000 grand prize. The winning truck tip will also be featured in a Progressive commercial auto insurance radio ad. In addition to one grand prize winner, there will be six category winners of \$500 each for funny tips, fuel saving tips, on-the-road tips, driving tips, and safety tips. Complete rules and information are also available at Progressive Truck Tips website.

Miller Supports Museum & Survivor Fund. At the NOV Towman Exposition in Baltimore, Randy Olson, VP of Marketing for Miller Industries, presented a check for \$5,000 to International Towing and Recovery Hall of Fame and Museum President Rolfe Johnson and ITRHFM Chairman George Connolly. The money was raised during Miller Industries' last rotator seminar held in Chattanooga. The funds will be split between the Museum and the Survivor Fund, which aids industry families who lose a loved one in the line of service. For more information, visit www.internationaltowingmuseum.org



Purpose Wrecker Opens. Purpose Wrecker opened its doors on Oct. 22 at 1732 Prospect Road in Wentzville, Mo. Owners Ken and Sue Malpocker welcomed about 120 guests for the event and gave away a 50-inch plasma TV to Tom Dailey of Cynthiana, Ky. Dailey was one of seven customers who purchased a truck at the event and who received an entry in the giveaway. 🚚



Our Lost Men



Richard S. Daley. A member of the 2008 International Towing & Recovery Hall of Fame, Daley passed away on Oct. 27. A tower since 1970, he was the owner of A-1 Towing of Hamilton, Ontario, Canada, and a member and former president of the Ontario Recovery Group. He was also a member of Provincial Towing Association, Automotive Transportation Services and Hamilton Chamber of Commerce. He acquired a Level 67A from WreckMaster and, in 2000, he was awarded the Most Influential Opinion from WreckMaster.

Jimmy Blackburn. A towing operator from Marshall, Tex., Blackburn was killed on Nov. 9 on the side of Interstate 20 when his flatbed was struck by an 18-wheeler that veered onto the shoulder. Blackburn's two customers were also killed.

Congratulations

NC's Tower Of The Year. Congratulations to Scott Johnson of John's Towing in Durham, N.C. He was presented with a plaque at the Nov. 1 meeting of the Towing & Recovery Professionals of North Carolina. The distinction is given by the members of the association in recognition of members who have given time and energy for the betterment of the association and who are involved in all areas of the towing industry.

Everyday Heroes. A round of applause goes to the employees of Pat's Service Center and Towing in Worcester, Mass. A man suspected of bank robbery ran into the tow yard and tried to jump a fence. Tow truck drivers pulled the suspect down and tried to hold him. The man pulled a knife and the drivers backed away. Again, the suspect tried to climb the fence and, again, the drivers pulled him down. The man pulled the knife once more and then got over the fence. The man jumped into a vehicle and took off. The drivers were able to take down the license plate number for police, who were able to track down and arrest the suspect.

OK's "Move Over" Law Now Includes Towers. As of Nov. 1, the Sooner State's Move Over law encompasses tow truck drivers. Drivers who do not move over into the next lane while passing a stopped tow truck with its lights on is subject to ticketing and a fine.

Tow Legislation

NY's New Predatory Towing Law. In October, a new predatory towing law became effective in N.Y. Requirements for private lots included conspicuously-posted signs stating that unauthorized vehicles would be towed at the owner's expense. The signs must also include information about the towing company and address where vehicles could be reclaimed.

It is now illegal for private lot owners to accept kickbacks or to profit from proceeds earned by towing companies that tow from the lot. Localities may also enact stricter laws

against predatory towing. Businesses that violate the new law may be stopped by the State Attorney General and may possibly be subjected to civil penalties of \$50 to \$1,000 for each violation.

Also In NY. Are you a member of the Empire State Towing & Recovery Association (ESTRA) and have you been contacted by a Kansas City law firm about the Consolidated Iron and Metal Superfund site? If so, you are encouraged to contact ESTRA counsel Peter O'Connell at 518-436-7202 for more information.

WEATHERING THE STORM

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Additionally, if you have met other out-of-town towing and recovery business owners at trade shows, they might prove invaluable in providing input.

Finally, a well-kept secret in the business world is an organization called the Service Corps of Retired Executives (SCORE). Affiliated with the Small Business Administration, SCORE describes itself as "a nonprofit association dedicated to educating entrepreneurs and the formation, growth, and success of small business nationwide."

With 389 chapters and 10,500 volunteers throughout the country, SCORE provides free and confidential advice for small business owners by pairing them with retired executives in the same or similar industry. Consider going to SCORE's website (www.score.org) and seeking help either in-person, online, or by phone.

Meet With Your Banker. Another trusted advisor who can help you weather the storm is your banker. In my 25-year career in commercial lending, I have held many meetings with business owners during difficult times. In fact, this is one of the most important roles for any banker. We certainly want our clients to stay in business and generally are motivated to do what we can to help troubled businesses make it through trying times.

It may be intimidating to go to your banker and share bad news, but it is important to be proactive when the storm hits. Bankers don't like surprises, so the earlier you seek the counsel of your banker, the better.

If you have borrowed money, the bank likely has a first lien on all of your company's assets and can shut you down by foreclosing. So, it is much more advantageous to get your banker on your side early rather than risk an adversarial relationship. Your banker often will be willing to help by extending loan terms (see sidebar).

Cut Your Costs. Small business owners sometimes are reluctant to reduce expenses during an economic downturn. This is often because the payroll makes up the largest

line-item component of expenses, and cutting payroll means cutting the hours of your employees or even letting some of them go.

This can be difficult if your employees have a long tenure in your business or if they are family members; however, failure to reduce your payroll when the storm hits might lead to the complete failure of your towing business and no jobs for anyone.

A good rule of thumb is to reduce your payroll by at least the same level as your revenue drops. For example, if your annual revenue was \$500,000 last year when the economy was stronger, and it drops to \$450,000 (10%), then you should seek to decrease your payroll by at least 10%. This

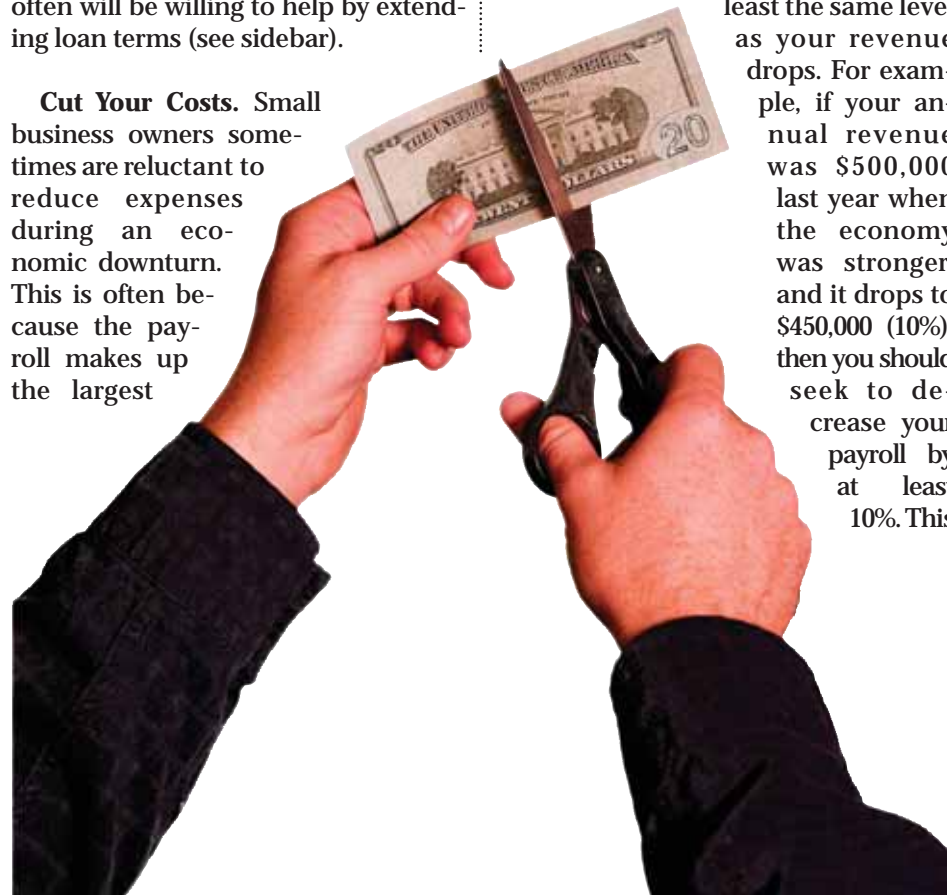
may not mean termination for any employees. You can also achieve payroll reduction by dropping some people to part-time, eliminating overtime, and cutting your own salary.

Of course, your payroll is not the only operating expense for your business. You can cut expenses in other areas. Try some of these cost-cutting measures:

- Seek bids for your various insurance coverages at the next renewal dates
- Initiate a control system for ordering supplies
- Contact your utilities providers to see if they offer any energy-saving incentive programs
- Review all service contracts, such as for office equipment and uniform cleaning, to see if you are really getting value to match the expense. If not, cut back or re-bid them.
- Reduce or eliminate certain employee perks
- Review your cellular plan
- Consider outsourcing services such as bookkeeping and payroll
- Renegotiate with your landlord the next time your lease expires

Use Your Trade Credit. Maintaining a good rapport with trade creditors is critical during a financial downturn. Stay in close contact with your trade creditors and let them know when they will be paid. But don't disclose too much (i.e. "Hey, Fred, we barely made payroll last week.") so as to avoid

See WEATHERING THE STORM, page 6



Joy Hallock



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 <p>2008 FORD F750, Cat 300HP, auto, air ride, MDL28 - 14 ton integrated, #N3676</p>	 <p>2008 FORD F550, PowerStroke, Automatic, 19' Jerr-Dan Carrier, #N1248</p>	 <p>2008 FORD F450, PowerStroke @ 350HP, Jerr-Dan, "Quick Pick" Integrated Wrecker. #10292</p>
 <p>2007 GMC C5500, 6.6L Duramax, Auto, loaded, 21' steel Jerr-Dan, with wheel lift, Choice of colors, #60074</p>	 <p>2008 STERLING ACTERRA, MBE 900, auto, 21' steel Jerr-Dan, loaded, #N5391</p>	 <p>2008 FORD F650, Cummins 6.7L @ 240HP, regular cab, auto, 21' rollback w/ wheel lift, Demo Unit, Call for Pricing. #N3690</p>
 <p>2008 FORD F650, Extended cab, XLT, 21' Jerr-Dan Carrier, wheel lift, #N3695</p>	 <p>2000 FORD F450, 7.3L, diesel, manual, XLT, Vulcan wrecker with wheel lift. #1104-1</p>	

INDUSTRIAL CARRIERS

 <p>2009 STERLING ACTERRA, Cummins ISC 300, Allison 12/23 on air ride, 22' Industrial Carrier, 12,000 winch, #50069</p>	 <p>2008 STERLING ACTERRA, Cummins ISC 330, Allison 18/80 on air ride, 28' Carrier, #50011</p>	 <p>2003 FREIGHTLINER(S) FL80, Cat 3126 @ 300HP, 9 speed, 14,600#/40K on air ride, 28' Ledwell Rollback Body, #40065</p>	 <p>2000 FREIGHTLINER FL60, Cummins 5.9L, Allison, 8/17.5K on spring, NO CDL, 22'x102" Ledwell Rollback, #40118</p>	 <p>2004 LEDWELL LW44HT3 TRI-AXLE TRAILER, 80,000# GVW on air ride, air lift front pusher axle, beavertail and hydraulic elevator, #40314</p>
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WEATHERING THE STORM

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alarming them and running the risk of being put on a C.O.D. basis.

Here are a few recommended steps to take in dealing with trade suppliers during a financial storm:

- Don't pay any bills early.
- Consider changing to a supplier with better trade terms even if the cost is a little higher.
- Shop for lower-cost suppliers for all items you purchase (inventory, cash register tape, office supplies, overnight shipping, etc.).
- Try to extend terms with your existing suppliers for a temporary period. If a supplier normally provides 30-day terms, ask for 45 or 60.
- Under-promise and over-deliver.
- Negotiate a bill due in 30 days to pay it in 45 and then pay it in 43. And don't let any of them get so far behind that the supplier cuts you off.

Don't Let Taxes Lapse. While you can often negotiate with your trade creditors, the Internal Revenue Service and other municipalities offer little flexibility. You must keep payroll taxes current at all costs. Not only can the IRS shut you down over delinquent withholdings for Federal, state, FICA, and Medicare taxes due, they also can pursue criminal charges in certain circumstances.

You also must keep state sales taxes and any local taxes (property taxes, etc.)

"When the tide goes out, we find out who's swimming naked"

current. If you have a reporting period approaching and don't have the funds available, contact your attorney to discuss your options.

Obtain Outside Capital. Don't assume that there are no options for outside capital during the current economic downturn. If you have a good business model and a strong track record of performance during a growing economy, there are many investors that could be willing to provide much-needed capital to help you get through this slump.

The first place you should look is your own personal resources. If you have accumulated cash and/or investments during the past few years, consider investing it in your business until the storm passes. There is no better place to invest your capital than the business from which you derive your livelihood. Likewise, if you have equity available in your residence, consider a home equity line to generate capital for your business.

If you are personally tapped out, there are other outside sources to consider:

- **Traditional institutional venture capital (VC) firms.** Sometimes referred to as a Private Equity Group, a traditional VC firm raises money from private sources such as insurance companies, hedge funds, pension funds, endowments, banks, and individuals. The minimum investment level generally is at least \$250,000 for a traditional VC firm, and they expect an annualized return on investment of at least 20 percent over a three- to seven-year period. Traditional VC money, however, is hard to come by during an economic slump.
- **Small Business Investment Corporations (SBICs).** The SBIC program is a public venture-capital initiative that is sponsored by the federal government, which uses a combination of private funds and federal government dollars to provide three important needs for eligible small businesses: equity capital, long-term loans (up to 20 years), and management assistance. SBICs are federally licensed, and they are scattered throughout the country. SBICs are a more viable option than traditional VC firms in an economic downturn, and they will consider smaller investments (as low as \$50,000 in some cases) and may offer more flexible terms.
- **"Angel" investors:** "Angel" investors are individual capital providers for small businesses. They typically are entrepreneurs who like to help small-business owners achieve high growth in exchange for a share of the profits from the business. Angels might invest anywhere from \$50,000 to one million or more in a business. The typical profile of an angel is a family member, friend, or small business owner in the community.

If you aren't sure where to find potential sources of capital like those listed above, ask your CPA or banker to point you in the right direction.

As with all storms, this current economic slump will eventually pass. Follow the steps outlined above and your towing business should be around to see the clouds roll away and the sun shining through when we finally reach the next period of sustained economic growth. ☘

The Laws Of Reality

- **Law of Mechanical Repair:** After your hands become coated with grease, your nose will begin to itch and you'll have to pee
- **Law of Gravity:** Any tool, when dropped, will roll to the least accessible corner
- **Law of Probability:** The probability of being watched is directly proportional to the stupidity of your act
- **Law of Alibis:** If you tell the boss you were late for work because you had a flat tire, the very next morning you will have a flat tire
- **Law of Variation:** If you change lines or traffic lanes, the one you were in will always move faster than the one you are in now
- **Law of Bathing:** When the body is fully immersed in water, the telephone will ring
- **Law of Encounters:** The probability of meeting someone you know increases dramatically when you are with someone you don't want to be seen with
- **Law of Results:** When you try to prove to someone that a machine will work, it won't
- **Law of Theater:** At any event, the people whose seats are furthest from the aisle arrive last
- **Law of Breaks:** As soon as you sit down to a cup of hot coffee, your boss will ask you to do something which will last until the coffee is cold
- **Law of Lockers:** If there are only two people in a locker room, they will have adjacent lockers
- **Law of Logic:** Anything is possible if you don't know what you are talking about
- **Law of Speaking:** A closed mouth gathers no feet
- **Law of Marketing:** As soon as you find a product that you really like, they will stop making it
- **Law of Health:** If you don't feel well, make an appointment to go to the doctor and by the time you get there you'll feel better
- **Law of Taste:** The better something tastes, the greater the probability that it is bad for you

Extend Your Loan

Bankers are often willing to help clients through hard times by extending loan terms. For instance, for a \$50,000 loan at 9% with a two-year term, the monthly payment would be \$2,285. By extending that same loan to a three-year payback, the monthly obligation decreases to \$1,590. This translates to a monthly savings of \$695 and annual cash flow enhancement of \$8,340.

Banks also will sometimes allow interest-only payments for six months or a year

during financial crises. The cash flow enhancement in this case is even more advantageous. The monthly interest payment on a \$50,000 loan at 9% would be \$375 (\$4,500 per year).

Modifying the two-year loan used in the example above to an interest-only repayment schedule would save \$1,910 per month and \$22,920 over a whole year. You can then resume monthly payments of principal and interest once the storm passes.



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TOW SAFETY

Watch Your Back

Private property tows can be lucrative but dangerous

By Bruce Ebert

What's the secret to towing illegally parked cars from private property without putting yourself in danger?

According to Dan Messina, president of Southwest Auto Tow in Dallas, two little letters: PR... public relations.

Messina recommends building relationships with police departments, private security agencies, businesspeople, and everyday people in apartment complexes and neighborhoods to assure that when your safety is at stake, there will be people on your side.

He recalls a towler who was shot at in the middle of the day when called on to remove an illegally parked car from an apartment-complex parking lot. "He should have called the police or the apartment security force and asked them to watch him tow it," said Messina.

Messina, who spoke in November at the American Towman Exposition in Baltimore, said that by building good community relations, towers not only look out for their safety, they can build business, too. "I give programs on safety tips at apartment complexes," he said, "telling tenants why it's necessary to tow cars that are illegally parked. We work with crime-watch groups and explain that whoever owns that car that's parked in someone else's space, or is parked where no vehicle is supposed to be parked ...

you don't know if it's just someone who was frustrated at not finding a proper spot or if it's a drug dealer."

No Argument

He also recommends not arguing with owners of cars who appear threatening when they come to the storage lot to retrieve their vehicles. "I give 13 percent of the cars back free," he said. "The less frustration you cause, the better off you'll be."

Towing from private property is Messina's specialty, something he did while working with another company for four years and has continued to do

since operating Southwest Auto Tow for the last five. He estimated he tows 1,500 cars per month, 75 percent of them from apartment complexes.

"There are a lot of apartment complexes in Dallas," Messina noted. "Thirty years ago, you could allot one space to every apartment unit and set aside maybe 50 more spaces for visitors and such and be assured you had enough. Today, one unit might have three cars, so space is tight. People will park in the spaces that belong to another complex."

Unfair Game

Many of his tows are authorized by businesses whose lots tend to be used by nightclub patrons who think just because the store might be closed, the

parking lot is fair game. "In those cases we're towing because the business owner knows it's important to keep the parking lot clean - not just because beer bottles and other trash are unsightly, but because trash sends

"The less frustration you cause, the better off you'll be"

the wrong message and invites a criminal element."

Messina prefers towing from private property over other types of jobs because profit margins are higher, and equipment costs and other overhead are lower ("No cars to flip over...just drag it onto a flatbed"), and you're in and out quickly. Unlike crash scenes, there is no need to wait for police to do a skid-mark analysis and other surveys.

"There's less involved. I can do this with a \$50,000 piece of equipment instead of a \$500,000 piece of equipment," Messina explained, "and I can do it fast - seven seconds." That's essential, he added, because "I'm taking the car without the owner's permission."

And that makes the risk greater. "I had a driver shot at five times," he said. "That's the down side."

Safety Tips

Messina has some safety tips for towers considering towing from private properties:

- "Do not carry a weapon, because there are people who do not like towers! You'll lose. If you think you're going to be in danger, contact the police."
- Accept credit cards. "When someone comes to your (storage) lot at three in the morning to get his car, he's not going to be carrying a lot of cash," said Messina. "We're all used to dealing in cash, but we need to be able to take credit cards as well."
- Have a lawyer on retainer. "You're going to get sued," Messina predicted. "There is always someone who will claim that you scratched or dented his car when really you didn't - he's just out to get you to pay for damage that had already been done."
- Replace trucks every two or three years to assure that your equipment is reliable and in top working order.
- "Wear a nice uniform and look professional."
- Have a company policy that requires drug testing and a criminal background check. "It will enhance your public image and add to your own peace of mind."

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TOW TALES

Wheel Men

The Simmons brothers have many stories to tell

By Andrea Evans

Whatever you want to call it — congeniality, Southern charm, a gift for gab, or just a knack for good ol' BS — Towman Parker Simmons of Wheel Service in Petersburg, VA has it. He can't help himself — he loves to tell stories. When he's talking, the line "I remember the time..." inevitably pops into the conversation and he reels off yet another tale. We share some of them with you (see sidebars), but first, we'll let Parker Simmons tell you about his towing business:

Wheel Service began in 1948 in Petersburg, Virginia. It was housed in a prefabricated metal Quonset hut built following World War II. The shop handled mainly under-car and -truck repairs for suspensions, brakes, wheel alignments, and auto frame straightening. Parker Simmons' father, James "Wibbie" Simmons bought half the business in 1949 and the remainder in 1950.

Parker and his brother Bragg grew up at Wheel Service. Parker Simmons remembers his father having an early 1950s-era Ford truck with a pipe boom. In fact, Simmons has the vehicle stored in a barn today. He said, "Daddy didn't do towing in the sense that my brother and I do today. He used it more as a convenience to him [and the business]."

In the 1970s, the Simmons brothers got into towing for the same reason, but that changed as the growing demand for reputable and dependable towers in the Petersburg area became evident. Their first truck was a 1955 Ford F-350 with a Holmes 400. Initially, the company had a few regular customers that called Wheel Service when their equipment needed a tow. Then state and local police departments started calling and Wheel Service got on their rotation lists.

"It was never what I call 'Yellow Pages' towing," said Simmons. "It was this account or that account. Towing

"Not having a payment book means a lot to me"

was something we didn't depend on but we never turned it down. And if it was something we couldn't do, there was an older guy in the county we called on."

Getting Serious

Finally, in the late 1970s, the Simmons brothers got serious about towing. So they bought a larger truck and put a boom on it. "This was before the days of wheel lifts," Simmons said. "Back then there weren't a lot of people [here] doing towing. There were what I call 'flash in the pans,' but if it was two o'clock in the morning, raining cats and dogs, snowing or sleeting, they don't answer the phone. In those days local law enforcement guys knew who they could count on — they could count them on one hand. It wasn't a rotation list like today. Law enforcement called who they wanted and who gave them the best service."

See TOW TALES, page 10

Restored Ford

In 1990, the Simmons brothers finished restoring the first wrecker Parker bought for the company in the early 1970s. The wrecker is a 1955 Ford F-350 with a Holmes 400. The brothers converted the Holmes 400 to a hydraulic winch and added a fabricated wheel lift.

Wheel Service took the '55 wrecker to the 1990 Virginia Towing and Recovery Operators (VATRO) Show in Roanoke. According to Parker, Walter Locke, then-president of Holmes, saw the customized wrecker and said, "Anybody can buy a new truck, shine it up, put new wheels on it and take it to a show. But to take an old truck, modernize it, and bring it to a show — now I like that!"

"Now to me that was a real compliment," said Parker.



The Simmons brothers restored this 1955 Ford

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The Plane Truth

A free ride aloft

Parker Simmons tells a story of a memorable recovery: "A man called and asked if we had a large wrecker. I answered yes. Then the man asked how much will it pull? I told the man it would pull a tractor-trailer. Why? What do you have?"

"The man answered, I've got a B-17 that's run off the runway at the Dinwiddie Airport... I said if you have the attachment point for me to hook to, I'm confident we can get it out. He assured me he knew the right point.

"Bragg and I each drove a Kenworth to the airport. I didn't know what we might find so I'd rather have it and not need it than need it and not have it... When we arrived there was some sort of World War II reenactment group



Parker's son flying in the bombardier seat of the B-17

setting up. There were all kinds of vintage vehicles, trucks and jeeps and all these people dressed in World War II uniforms and women in suits of that time, too... The B-17 that was stuck was one of only three still flying.

"The airport had done a major overhaul on the yard around the runway. It had been graded, topsoiled, and re-sod. The huge plane taxied in fine and made a hard right turn to taxi off the runway. In the turn one of the wheels went off the runway, into the grass, and disappeared out of sight. The wing tipped and almost hit the ground..."

"I went to talk with one of the men in charge of the plane... I explained what I was going to do, the rigging, and the things we'd use. Then we were going to take it super, super slow; no herky jerky. And if at any time you don't like what you see me doing, stop me.

"He said, 'I've rather have you doing this than a Ph.D in engineering because you know what you're doing with the rigging'... Then he said, 'I just might take you for a ride.'

'I talked with Bragg and said, 'Instead of charging these people, how about if they give us a ride?' Bragg said, 'I would have done it for free anyhow.'

"We got the big plane out fine... [and] we came back a couple days later and they took us for a ride... I've got a picture of my son, Jimmie, sitting in the bombardier's seat... They flew us over I-85, and in the broad window of that B-17 cockpit, you could see clearly below... It gave me a real sense of appreciation for what those airmen must have gone through in the war."

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TOW TALES

continued from page 8

“Now everything has gotten PC. Simply having a tow truck puts you on the list; you may not know how to operate it. I jokingly say if a guy thinks he’s going to make fast money, he either looks at riding mowers or flatbed carriers. You used to have to have a bricks-and-mortar place that housed your business. Nowadays a lot of guys work from their home, which is a code violation right there.”

Although there’s more competition

in towing around Petersburg, there are many reasons Wheel Service continues to be successful. “I don’t throw anything away and when a piece of equipment hits the street with ‘Wheel Service’ painted on the door, it is paid for,” said Simmons. “That’s how we do it...like Johnny Cash, one piece at a time. Pay as we go. Not having a payment book means a lot to me.”

Do The Math

Parker and Bragg Simmons readily fabricate and modify their equipment as needed. In 1986, they took a C-750

cab-over Ford truck with air brakes and put a 20-foot JerrDan steel deck on it.

“It was indestructible,” said Simmons. “You’d pop the air brakes on that and it wasn’t going anywhere. Back then (early 1980s), most guys had Ford 350s with aluminum decks. By the time they put a car on it they were overweight, and still some towed another car behind. These guys were literally riding around by the seat of their britches. Do the math; it doesn’t work. In that big truck [C-750 Ford], it would sit still so I could do recovery work no other rollback could do. It’s a gas burner now so we took the bed off and put it on a 4900 International.”

In the ‘90s the brothers bought a Kenworth tractor and stretched the chassis. Next, they took a Holmes 650 mechanical wrecker, converted it to a hydraulic boom and put a wheel lift on it. “It doesn’t do everything a factory-built does,” Simmons said, “but it does enough to keep me in or out of trouble, as the case may be. I’ve called a local crane company when I’ve got [a job] that needs what a rotator does now. In this area we’re not in a big trucking hub. We’ve got I-85 and I-95 in Petersburg. There’s not enough happening everyday to warrant a quarter of a million-dollar piece of equipment sitting out here.”

Today they have two Kenworths for heavy-duty jobs. One has a stretched chassis; the other has a traditional Holmes 750 wrecker body and a 30,000-pound Zacklift mounted on the back. “That’s our main go-getter. It probably takes 80 percent of our calls. It does what we need it to do and that’s all that counts. So long as you can go out and bring it back.”

Wheel Service has nine employees. “We’re all a big family,” said Simmons. Most actually are family: Besides Parker and Bragg, Parker’s wife Jennie and sister-in-law Ruby Vaughn manage the office; brother-in-law Tommy Reeks is shop foreman; and there are five mechanics.

After more than 30 years in towing, Parker and Bragg Simmons of Wheel Service continue to enjoy their work. “Just when you think you’ve seen everything in the world in the towing business,” Parker said, “something new surprises you.”



Brothers Bragg and Parker Simmons of Wheel Service

House On Wheels

With its own ghost

This past summer Parker Simmons and his family appeared on A&E’s season premiere of “Paranormal State.” It seems Simmons’ son, Jimmie, has been seeing things — objects, apparitions — in their house since he was 10 or 12 years old. “Now mind you,” said Simmons, “he’s a normal, tough football player kind of guy. He’s no fruit loop.”

Given its history, the Simmons’ homestead indeed could have some hidden secrets. The house is one of the original buildings on property that General Robert E. Lee and his Confederate officers used as their headquarters in the week before their surrender at Appomattox in April, 1865.

When the suburbs crowded in, the property frontage was zoned commercial and a national retail pharmacy wanted to purchase two acres of the frontage including the house. “After talking with the family,” said Simmons, “tearing the house down was not an option. Moving the house was the only option we had. The biggest, heaviest, oldest thing we ever towed was my house.”

The Simmons found a Virginia Beach company, Expert House Movers. “One of their claims to fame is they moved the Hatteras (NC) lighthouse,” said Simmons. “It’s a family-run business. They came out and raised the house, chimney and everything. They put dolly wheels underneath it. They had a big Mack all-wheel-drive tractor. It was a huge off-road military vehicle in a former life. Nothing like any commercial tractor you see going down the road.

In January 2007, they pulled the house off its original foundation and moved it to a temporary location. “It was a big event,” said Simmons. “We had TV crews here because the house had been sitting here forever. The front section was built around 1850 according to the historical architectural experts...”

In March 2007, they moved the house another quarter of a mile. Expert House Movers set the Civil War relic house on its new foundation. They also moved a barn built in the 1950s and joined it to the house on the new foundation. “People thought I was crazy when they saw what I had done. Now I tell people I live in a barn,” said Simmons. “The inside walls, ceiling, and floors have been refinished. It’s all natural-wood beams and floors now. It’s gorgeous.”

If you’d like to know more about the mysteries of the Simmons home place, the A&E episode of “Paranormal State” is called *Family Ties*. According to Simmons, the network frequently airs the episode.

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Hot coffee all day!

Traffic Arrow

Superior Signals has introduced their latest Traffic-Manager SRSA Series LED split traffic arrow that provides warning and directional information to approaching vehicles with 32 high-intensity LEDs and warning stick. The unit is capable of up to 11 arrow flash patterns and 11 warning

"The unit is capable of up to 11 arrow patterns"

patterns, using simultaneous or alternating flashing.

The SRSA8004 has an aluminum housing, clear lenses, amber LEDs, and carries a five-year warranty. The controller and 25-foot cable are included. Both flush-surface mounting and L-bracket mounting kits are available. Call 800-447-3693, email info@superior



Superior Signals' split traffic arrow

orsignals.com, or visit www.superior-signals.com

New Snowplow

Blizzard Snowplows has introduced the 8000LT straight-blade snowplow, the first eight-foot snowplow specifically designed for use on half-ton pickup trucks. The 8000LT is a light, rugged snowplow designed for light commercial applications.

Additional features include a flared moldboard for increased snow-rolling action; durable, continuous welded seams; and a convenient, removable light tower. Visit www.blizzardplows.com



New plow for half-ton trucks

Wireless Lights

TowMate offers what it calls "the world's only full-functioning wireless tail-light system," the TM-21. This



New TowMate wireless tail-lights

21-inch system attaches to a vehicle with powerful 90-pound magnets and has bright amber turn signals. It comes complete with light, transmitter, charge cord, protective foot covers, and instructions. The TM-21 features up to 20 hours of use between re-charges and has an approximately 300-foot range and no external antenna. Call TowMate at 800-680-4455 or visit www.towmate.com

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New & improved equipment from industry innovators

Jerr-Dan Rolls Out Four New Products



Jerr-Dan's new 50-ton Integrated Wrecker

50-Ton Wrecker

Jerr-Dan Corporation, an Oshkosh Corporation company and a leading manufacturer of towing and recovery equipment, has introduced its new 50-Ton Integrated Wrecker, a large-capacity recovery and towing system that, according to Jerr-Dan, features "the longest boom of any integrated wrecker," with a 174-inch reach past the tailboard at 0 degrees, as well as a capacity of 30,000-pounds when fully extended at 30 degrees.

Also according to Jerr-Dan, the new wrecker delivers "the industry's longest underlift," with a standard reach of 141 inches at 17,000 pounds when fully extended, and 53,000 pounds when retracted.

To handle the most difficult vehicles, such as motor coaches and fire trucks, the available coach boom offers a 180-inch reach and a capacity of 17,600 pounds at full extension, and 56,500 pounds when fully retracted.

New Rolling Tarp

Jerr-Dan Corporation and Aero Industries, a leader in tarping systems,

offer an all-new, easy-to-operate rolling tarp model. Jointly developed, this new model features a design that easily covers and uncovers a carrier deck in seconds. Instead of having to climb over the carrier deck and tie down a tarp, the driver can walk alongside and cover a vehicle in seconds.

Among many key features are a rear-locking system that increases the tarp's tension while securing the load from ground level; a system of spring shocks on the uplift bows, keeping the tarp tight and reducing wear on the bows; and a strong, coated vinyl tarp, available in several colors, that works without cables to provide a tight, seamless cover. Contact Aero at 800-535-9545 or visit www.aeroindustries.com

Premium Six-Ton Carrier

According to Jerr-Dan, the company's new Premium Six-Ton Carrier Bed is "fifty percent stronger than most standard-duty carrier beds." The deck's larger, roll-formed rubrails provide twice the structural strength of traditional angle-iron rubrails. Jerr-



A super-strong six-ton carrier bed

Dan's weld process ensures a smooth outer surface for a striking appearance.

The standard 102-inch-wide deck features a full-length, 10-gauge, 50 ksi, pressed-diamond decking for strength and visual appeal. The six-ton carrier bed is available in 19-foot, 20-foot and 21-foot lengths and the standard low-profile, heavy-duty approach tip allows for easier loading.

Underneath, larger six-inch cross members offer improved corrosion protection and provide five percent more strength than other 12-inch spaced designs. Offered as options are a wireless remote-control system and deep universal toolbox with stainless steel door covers and a brighter 10-head light bar.

Fifth-Wheel HD Underlift

Jerr-Dan now offers the new HDUL-450D Heavy Duty Fifth Wheel Detachable Underlift. Designed for fast and easy recovery of disabled equipment, the HDUL-450D converts

a fleet's tractor into a cost-effective HD recovery unit with the same or better lift capacity than most heavy-duty wreckers.

According to Jerr-Dan, in its class, "the HDUL-450D features the highest structural capacity at maximum reach, the longest extended boom reach, and the most negative tilt." In its 69-inch retracted state, this chassis-mounted, three-stage, independent attachment features a lift rating of 45,000 pounds; fully extended at 140 inches, it delivers a lift rating of 24,000 pounds.

Among available options are a 20,000-pound, single-speed planetary winch with wireless remote control for added capability and a deep universal toolbox with two stainless-steel door covers.

To learn more about Jerr-Dan products, see your Jerr-Dan dealer or visit www.jerr-dan.com; for more information about Oshkosh, visit www.oshkoshcorporation.com



Rolling tarp from Jerr-Dan & Aero Industries



New HD fifth-wheel underlift attachment

Web Wisdom

Having a first-rate towing Net site is just good business

By Allan T. Duffin

Call it “digital towing.” The computer sitting on your desk can connect you with fellow towers around the world in the blink of an eye. And with a few clicks and some carefully chosen search words, you can find just about any information you need on the Internet.

A Google search for towing companies or related information will uncover over 16 million web pages of information. These days, many towers have a presence on the Internet, with at least one web page that provides company data and contact information.

Having your information easily accessible on the Internet in a “brochure”-type site can help boost your customer base significantly. But how are these sites created? And in the end, are they really that useful to towers?

Perhaps the greatest difference between towing sites and other business sites on the Internet is the time factor involved for most of the customers

who visit the site. For example, to buy a pair of shoes you can visit a traditional store in your neighborhood or simply stay home and make your purchase online. On the other hand, if your right front tire just blew out and you're sitting on the shoulder calling for a tow, unless you have a mobile phone with wireless web capability, you probably can't access the Internet to find the closest towing service.

Market Online

Under more normal circumstances — for example, if you're at home searching for information about a towing company's equipment, or in your office trying to pay a purchase order by credit card — a website can make the process much easier. “Websites give people an alternative to finding information and capabilities about our company,” said Doug Harff, vice president of sales and marketing for United Road Towing, the largest towing company in the United States.



The Ellison's Towing husband-and-wife team Brent Ellison and Cheri Ellison-Carroll of Mountain View, CA worked with their Web designer on the layout, text, and photos

“Along with direct mailings to our customers for awareness,” he added, “we can direct them to the website, where they can find more detailed information they need.”

It's worthwhile to spend the money to market your company online, said Harff. “We posted our employment application so people can print it out. We posted job openings, held-for-sale assets, and lots of other information. The website helps broaden the base of people who might need our service.” Harff works closely with a web designer to keep www.unitedroadtowing.com up-to-date and useful for the firm's customers.

Another informative website is located at www.petrofftowing.com. Petroff Towing proudly calls itself “The Heavy Duty and Recovery Specialists of the Metro Saint Louis Area,” and created a website that provides information about its four operating locations. Mixing a blue, gray, and white color palette with dashboard-themed graphics, an energetic logo, and some background animation, the Petroff Website is a good example of how to pack a lot of information into one place.

Petroff Towing didn't need to contract a web designer to create its site — Michelle Petroff built it herself, in-

house. “I had previously worked for a company that did electronic publishing,” she explained, “so I came from a web design background.” Petroff designed the original site for her family's company in 1998 and updated it in April of this year. In addition to brochure-type information, the site provides an online home for the racecars and drivers that the shop sponsors.

Design Help

The simplest way to design and launch your website — and keep it up-to-date — is to hire a web designer who can provide an all-inclusive package. Such a package can include the registration of a domain name, hosting of your website, the design itself, and ongoing updates and maintenance. By taking this route, you need only pay one bill instead of several to keep your website going.

Your designer can be local if you prefer working face-to-face. Some towing firms hire designers from other states as well, sometimes on a referral from a trusted source, sometimes because the required expertise isn't available in the immediate area. Whatever approach you take, give the project your full attention, said Cheri Ellison-Carroll, owner of Ellison Towing, Inc.

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The Nation's Largest Towing Company

The Web site for United Road Towing (see the full home page site at www.unitedroadtowing.com), the nation's largest towing company, headquartered in Mokena, IL, is packed with information and features



The Ellison's Towing crew

of Mountain View, CA. "Nobody knows your company better than you do," she pointed out. "Set aside the time to work with your designer, and give him or her the content to make it happen."

When creating a new website, make sure that you clearly define the responsibilities of you and your designer, said Ellison-Carroll. "Is your web designer going to take the photos for you? Who is going to think of catchy titles? You need to make sure that everything is clear." Towing firms that are searching for a designer need to do their homework, she advised. "Take a look at the other websites they've done, and their most recent work. Also, know the true cost up front. If you see an existing website that you like, ask the designer how much it will cost to make a similar one for you."

Sometimes towing companies provide more than just general direction to their web designers: they get involved in the layout of the site itself. At Ellison's Towing, Inc., Ellison-Carroll and husband Brent contributed their creative skills to the project. "I worked with a company that created a lot of the formatting of the site," said Ellison-Carroll. "I did all of the writing, and Brent coordinated the photos. We worked on a lot of the design, which is accessible at www.ellisonstowing.com."

Staying Current

Establishing a good working relationship with your designer is also critical to building a good website for your business. "You want to have somebody you really enjoy working with," said Ellison-Carroll, "because it really is a team effort." After you pay your designer for setting up the website, he or she can bill you periodically for any updates that you require. If your site needs frequent updating — for example, if you want to add fresh news every month about safety measures you're implementing in the shop, or if you want to post weekly photos of the latest recovery jobs — consider paying a monthly retainer fee to your designer. That way you know that he or she is ready to make updates whenever you request them.

Paying for individual updates can get expensive, so try to group your updates together. This also makes things easier for your web designer. Also, remember that asking for major changes might necessitate a redesign of the site, which costs more. So when creating the initial design, try to allow for future expansion as much as possible.

Since fees vary by designer, make sure you discuss all of the pricing in

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1996 INTERNATIONAL 4700.
7.3L, 5 spd, 19" Jerr-Dan bed, needs a little work.
\$12,500.

WEB WISDOM

continued from page 15

detail before work begins on the site. Sometimes you can get deals on low-price (or even free) domain registration and hosting. Be careful about any "too-good-to-be-true" offers. Review your designer's work samples and get things in writing. As with towing, sometimes those cheap prices mean you're getting so-so or substandard work.

A sharp website is just one part of a

towing firm's marketing strategy, albeit a critical one in this digital age. In fact, *not* having a website could actually hurt your business: technologically-minded customers might assume that if you're not up-to-date on the web, then perhaps your equipment isn't either.

Even a simple one-page website is better than no website at all. "We strive to maintain the highest standards of quality and professionalism," said Petroff, "and a website is yet another first impression of our business." ❖



Michelle Petroff of Petroff Towing, Caseyville, IL, is the company's Web designer. The colors and logo match their wreckers, for a consistent branding theme.

Website Insights

Whether you're creating a brand-new website or overhauling an existing one for your towing service, here are some tips from designers and towers who have been through the process already.

Ask yourself, "What's it all for?" This is the first and most important question for companies who want to build a website. What information will the website present to the customer, and what features will it have? "This is where we bring to the public what we work so hard to deliver," said Cheri Ellison-Carroll, owner of Ellison Towing, Inc. of Mountain View, CA.

Creating a website is a process of self-analysis, she added. "It can be a wonderful experience because you get so much better acquainted with your own company." Answering basic questions about your business will help you design a website that is clear and helpful to the customer. "Ask yourself, 'Why are we so wonderful? What sets us apart?'" recommended Ellison-Carroll.

Branding. A good website is only part of a company's overall branding scheme. "Our website is part of our whole imaging campaign," said Michelle Petroff of Petroff Towing in St. Louis, MO. The color scheme and logo displayed on the website carry over to the paint scheme on the company's equipment. "All of our trucks are blue with gray and chrome," noted Petroff. "Our web colors complement that."

Domain name. The domain name for your website is usually your company name — for example, "johndoetowing.com." Your designer can check to see if the name is still available for use, since you'll need to register it and pay an annual renewal fee. But once you've purchased the name, it's yours to keep. Just make sure that you pay your renewal fee each year. It's very similar to a magazine subscription. If your web designer provides an all-inclusive service, then he or she will probably take care of this for you.

Hosting. Websites typically consist of a series of "pages" and associated files — photos, graphics, forms, and the like — that are kept on a computer server. The company that provides server space to "host" your website will charge a fee for its service. Again, many web designers will include these fees in a package price for your website.

Design. Most "brochure" sites consist of a title, a few photos, and some text. If you'd like to go a step further, hire a designer who has experience with graphic design. Web designers with an artistic edge over their peers can create layouts that break away from the basic, boxy, text-and-photo layout of most sites. "Keep it clean and simple," recommended Petroff. "You need a good site map and navigation, with everything laid out logically."

The site map is a flow chart of the site, showing how a visitor travels from one item to the next as he or she selects navigation buttons or pull-down menus. "A website needs a good flow from one item to the next," said Petroff. "The main things we wanted to feature included the types of equipment we use, all of our vendors, and the different types of services we offer."

At first glance, all of the information on a website might not be completely obvious. For her site, www.petrofftowing.com, Petroff included a wide variety of pages that are accessible only from the drop-down menu on the



Petroff Towing heavy-duties at the St. Louis arch

company's homepage. "There are lots of little hidden sections that you don't see at first," she said. "As you navigate the site, you can go layer by layer." This type of interactivity makes a visit to your site both interesting and fun for the customer.

Pricing. Designers charge anything from \$99 into the thousands for a new website. The rate depends on the number of pages, complexity of the design, how soon you need the site completed, and the designer's experience. If you want animated features in your site, it will cost extra since it's additional programming work for the designer. Again, be aware that lower prices don't necessarily translate into good design, so be prepared to pay for good quality.

Plan for future expansion. Information and interactivity are important in creating a website that new and existing customers will visit again and again. "It's important to have an interactive website — and one you can grow with," said Ellison-Carroll, who recommends that towers consider including features like electronic forms and credit card processing on their sites.

Providing online interactivity helps "bridge the sale" by making it easier for the customer, she added. Petroff Towing built a number of forward-looking features into its website. "We get visitors from all over the world," said Petroff. "And we get information requests not only from customers and towing enthusiasts, but also from towing companies across the globe." Among the site's visitors are towers from as far away as the United Kingdom, Australia, and South Africa.

The Petroff site allows visitors to create their own accounts and apply for credit as well. "Some customers contact us through the website," added Petroff. "We can also do purchase orders online."

Doing it yourself. If you're creatively inclined and would rather design a site yourself, there are a number of software packages on the market that can speed the process along. Be aware of the cost, however: Adobe Dreamweaver (www.adobe.com/products/dreamweaver), one of the most widely used design programs, retails for \$399. Freeway by Softpress (www.softpress.com), a web design package specifically created for the Macintosh computer series, has a similar price tag.

If you'd rather not dig into your budget for top-of-the-line design software, there are cheaper but less powerful design programs like CoffeeCup (www.coffeecup.com). Also, popular hosting services like Yahoo! offer very basic downloadable software packages that help you create a website

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Bad Idea

Two towmen died at the same time and met Saint Peter at the Pearly Gates. St. Peter said, "I'd like to get you guys in now but our computer is down. You'll have to go back to Earth for about a week but you can't go back as towmen. What'll it be?"

The first towman said, "I've always wanted to be an eagle soaring above the Rocky Mountains."

"So be it," said St. Peter and off flew the first towman.

The second towman mulled this over for a moment and asked, "Will anything we do during this week count toward our eligibility to enter Heaven, St. Peter?"

"No, I told you the computer's down. There's no way we can keep track of what you're doing."

"In that case," said the second towman, winking at St. Peter, "I've always wanted to be known as a real stud, know what I mean?"

"Yes, and so be it," said St. Peter, and the second towman disappeared back to Earth.

A week went by, Heaven's computer was fixed, and the Lord told St. Peter to recall the two towmen.

"Will you have any trouble locating them?" He asked.

"The first one should be fairly easy," said St. Peter. "He's somewhere over the Rockies flying with the eagles. But the second one could prove to be more difficult to find."

"Why is that?" asked the Lord.

"He's on a snow tire somewhere in New Hampshire."

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TOW PROS

Tow With Coe

Tips, tools, and tricks of the trade from a respected pro

By Tracy Powell

Gary Coe is well-known in the industry. He has been in the towing business for 42 years and owns four tow truck dealerships and two towing companies. He is also a towing and recovery business and technology consultant, advising owners and giving seminars on new products, business strategies, and other tools of the trade through Tow Consulting of Portland, Oregon.

"There are lots of innovations out there that are solutions to problems," Coe said. "When I talk about tools and tricks of the trade, what I present is two parts. The first part is on the latest tools to use in the industry that people may not have been exposed to. Some of the attendees to my seminar may already be using all of these tools, but these are the ones who are looking for the latest tools, the people always looking for latest hot tip or information."

Appropriately, Coe also owns a mail-order business called TowPartsNow.com (www.towpartsnow.com). TowPartsNow does business online and through toll-free catalog supplies. According to Coe, what makes his parts business different from competitors is the fact that he also has access through his dealerships to wrecker "hard parts" for all the major brands. "So while they sell ratchets, chains and straps, and binders and tow lights and so forth, we sell all of those things and the wrecker hard parts - bushings, replacement hydraulic rams, replacement L-arms, things like that," Coe said.

Points To Ponder

In his seminars, Coe offers practical towing and recovery solutions through suggested techniques, use of certain equipment offered by TowPartsNow.com, and "tricks of the trade" based on



Gary Coe of Tow Consulting and TowPartsNow.com



The Towers' Dream DuraPro 8-point carrier tiedown system

his extensive professional experience. One useful equipment example he mentions is the eight-point tie-down.

"For years, with a tie-down on a car carrier, most people used a single J-hook over the rear-end housing and dropped the chain into a key slot, and then sucked it up tight with a winch," Coe said. "We're promoting an eight-point tie-down. We're hoping that the day of the J-hook and chain - and winching it with a cable - is over."

There are a variety of eight-point tie-down products available to towers. "Some of them have a hook on the ratchet to go into a D-ring or a key slot; some of them have a chain to go into a key slot," Coe added. "And some of them have a chain to go on the end of a cable. So there are lots of ways to attach it and lots of ways to accommodate even if you don't have enough tie-down holes on your wrecker."

A Side Job

An example of another new product he likes to mention is a version of a side puller. Traditional side pullers usually consist of framework behind a truck's cab and in front of the bed. Operators can winch from this framework off the side of the truck. But what Coe offers is a different type, a pulley that mounts in the bed through the existing key slots to pull a towed vehicle sideways.

"Sometimes when you are winching a car up onto a flatbed, the wheels are not aligned or something is wrong and it doesn't come up straight," Coe said. "This pulley allows you to pull the car sideways a little bit as you're winching it up so that you can get it up on the bed. It's a neat little tool and it fits in the existing key slots that you use for tie-downs."

Coe is also a proponent of suction-cup tow lights. Picture a pickup with a fiberglass canopy, a vertical back glass, and a bumper that has a rubber step attached to the top of the bumper. There's no place to attach a set of tow

"The clubs have taken on the role of the middlemen"

lights. According to Coe, it's the same with a Ford LTD, which has to be towed by the rear tires - again, magnetic tow lights can't attach to a surface because the hood is aluminum. After a couple of relatively expensive attempts at developing these products, "we have a set that we develop and manufacture ourselves that are affordable and reliable," Coe said.

Finance Factoids

Coe also owns a finance company that helps finance high-risk tow truck buyers. If he can't get financing through the regular sources, Coe considers taking it on himself. Accordingly, the second major part of his seminars includes tips on how to secure financing. In today's troubled economic times, these are especially well received.

According to Coe, the first concern of towers is to have viable financials, including accurate financial statements, and a protected credit rating. "Viable financials will get you the best financing values," he said. "Financing is all about risk and rate. The higher the risk, the higher the interest rate; the higher the risk, the higher the down payment you have to come up with. A guy with 'A' credit can get in with nothing down and he makes his first payment 30 days from now. I just did one of our towing companies at an interest rate of 6.96 percent, not too bad.

"But if you have no sound financials and terrible credit or no credit, you end up paying upwards of 29 percent interest for loans and 20 percent down. Sometimes you even have to come up with additional security, like a title to a vehicle. You can see the difference in profitability if a guy is buying his trucks at 6.9 percent versus a guy paying 29 percent - the latter guy is in trouble."

Issues & Answers

The financial aspect of Coe's seminars includes discussions of current national issues affecting the industry. For example, the auto manufacturers - almost all of them - have signed up with the auto clubs to handle their warranty tows.

"If we're doing a warranty tow at the rate of \$40 versus a warranty tow that we used to do for a dealership for \$65 to \$75, you can see that the clubs have taken on the role of the middlemen," Coe said. "Because the auto manufacturers are working with the clubs and their networks of service providers, the profit has been taken out of these

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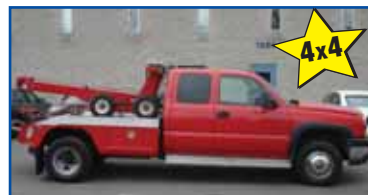
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TOW PROS

continued from page 18

types of tows and returned it to the industry at a fraction. That has effectively taken millions of dollars out of our industry. It's a sad deal."

Because of this, a lot of towers – like Coe – have focused on work other than clubs. He estimates that his business does about 10 auto club calls a week. The vast majority of his towing business is high-dollar, with an average ticket of \$125. "And that's where it needs to be to make money," Coe said. "You can't be doing these \$30 AAA calls and these \$40 club calls – or at least very many of them. Otherwise they'll eat your lunch."

Another item on Coe's agenda is discussion about bad debt with auto clubs. He refers to one club known for its "straggler" invoices, which build up and build up. At one point, that club owed him more than \$100,000. He never did collect all of it before terminating business with them.

"That's obviously not acceptable, so [do you] want that sort of bad debt to continue or should you move on to another block of business?" Coe said. "A club that operates that way doesn't need to be in the market."

Whether the topic is useful new products, successful financing, or addressing industry issues, Coe's voice of experience, fresh ideas, and thoughtful views provide towers with practical insights for surviving these difficult economic times.

OUR LOST MEN

Living In The Light

He buried a dark past with kindness & competence

By Jill Coley

On April 29, 2008, towman Danny Hogg, 63, headed east on Interstate 26, near the small South Carolina town of St. George, to answer a service call. He saw a fellow tower loading a vehicle in the westbound lane.



Danny Hogg's funeral hearse, led by Davis Towing

Hogg called his colleague from his cell phone and told him to be careful. Perhaps it was a premonition.

Less than 15 minutes later, a passing box truck fatally struck Hogg. He was airlifted to a hospital in Charleston, S.C., where he died from his injuries.

"Safety — that was absolutely foremost in Danny's work," said Michael Harley, owner of Davis Towing in Summerville, S.C., where Hogg worked at the time of his death. Harley still has Hogg's cell phone, which keeps the record of his last call. "I will keep it and never turn it off," Harley said.

The life of Danny Hogg, which was cut short alongside that stretch of rural highway, was a life he had worked hard to transform. In the 1970s, Hogg made headlines for his role as an alleged henchman for a criminal gang that called itself the Dixie Mafia. Hogg turned state witness and received immunity in a 1978 murder trial that sent two men to prison.

But that person was half a life away when Hogg died. "Whoever he was 30 years ago was not an indication of the Danny I knew," said Harley, who knew Hogg for more than a dozen years. "He changed from someone with a violent youth to a family man, and it didn't have to be his family."

Harley's favorite memory of Hogg was when he came back to the office one afternoon and walked outside to see his four-year-old granddaughter riding a tricycle in and out of a circle of cones Hogg had set up. "I'd give \$1,000 for a video of that today," he said.

Hogg earned a reputation as a hard worker. "I couldn't beat Danny to the office," Harley said. "He'd be in here

making coffee or scrubbing the floor before five a.m. He was an honest man making an honest living."

John Hill, owner of Tigger's Towing in Summerville, S.C., employed Hogg for about a decade before Hogg left to work at Davis Towing. "He was the best person you'd ever want to meet," Hill said. "He would never speak harsh to people. He got killed doing his job, making a living for his wife and kids."

Another Man Down

Hogg left behind three sons and two daughters. Friends and family of Hogg were upset when media latched onto his colorful past at the time of his death, rather than focus on the man he was before and after his dark time.

Known as a champion boxer throughout the Southeast, Hogg won the Golden Gloves championship in 1961. It was this talent that the wrong people latched onto, friends say. "He was a boxer. He made his living strong-arming and bouncing," Hill said. "A lot of people downplay what God does for people. I know what He's done for Danny."

After Hogg's death, Hill heard from the last person to see him alive — the driver of the truck he was picking up. Hogg worked to help the driver by the side of the road, Hill said, and as the driver tried to walk with Hogg along the side of the highway, Hogg shoed him away to keep him safe.

The South Carolina Highway Patrol said Hogg was at the side controls of his wrecker as the passing truck's mirror clipped him.

On the day of Hogg's funeral, 29 trucks representing 23 area companies formed a procession in honor of the man Hogg became. "It's pretty neat to see everyone who loved you showing respect," Hill said.

Scott Chambers, owner of Affordable Towing in North Charleston, S.C., organized the procession, which he said served two purposes. Firstly, the event honored a beloved friend and respected tower. The second reason was to say, "We're here to look out for the towers. We want people to be aware we are doing a service, and we need to be watched out for."

In 2005, the most recent data available, 390 workers died after being struck alongside a roadway, according to the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health. That num-

See OUR LOST MEN, page 25

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Funeral procession drivers pose with their trucks

Heather Infinger

IN MY VIEW

And Still Driving!

A natural option for a veteran towman's retirement

By Bill Jackson

I first sat in a "wrecker" in about 1939 when I used to go out with my dad in this Model B-chassis Ford. It was fitted with a "hand mangle" that required superhuman strength to wind it in, never mind the additional weight of the load on the end!

I guess that must have been when I got the recovery business in my blood, a condition for which there is no cure. Since then, many years have passed very happily; I have made so many great friends around the world.

But there has to come a time when the only decent thing to do is to take off the spurs and start living the laid-back



Bill Jackson's first truck

life. But here's the rub: When you have that burr under your saddle, it's hard to just stop everything, even when you, like me, are 84!

Stopping everything leaves you with a very big daily gap with little to do except (in Florida) wait to eat an "early

"The only decent thing to do is to take off the spurs and start living"

bird" dinner at four p.m. So, I thought I would take a moment here to give any reader contemplating retirement some final free sage advice: Consider my decision to take up an entirely different occupation that fills the gap so well: I became a Park Ranger!

Near to my home are two great state parks visited by thousands of tourists every year. After getting some training, I am now behind the wheel again — driving a 12-seater golf cart, taking tourists from the main office and gift shop over a one-quarter-mile bridge to the beaches and the sea.

The job is not difficult — only a day or two per week — but I meet happy folks on holiday and tell them all about our park and its history, which goes back to the first trapper who discovered this coast around 1800.

In previous years, I never had the time to just sit and enjoy the beauty



A man with a (retirement) plan

all around me; now I can breathe it in and just be thankful I have found something that fills the gap of retirement just fine. And I'm still behind the wheel.

So I maintain that the way to go for a happy retirement is to get back to nature. Forget the smell of diesel, the roar of the Peterbilt, and the list of bills you couldn't collect! Get outside, choose something invigorating like I'm doing, and enjoy your new life! 🐾

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- C) Check one box to indicate the number of tow trucks in your fleet:**
- 1. 1 to 2 trucks
 - 2. 3 to 10 trucks
 - 3. 11 to 25 trucks
 - 4. over 25 trucks

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TOW TECH

Smooth Shifting

Tips for keeping your gears moving in the cold

By Dan Montegari

As you know, standard transmissions and transfer cases change ratios, engage, or disengage by moving gears so they mesh. In a large number of late-model-year vehicles with electronic four-wheel transfer cases, electric solenoids are used to engage or disengage units.

This process is made possible by synchronizers, units that basically align gears so they mesh. In cold temperatures oils used in standard transmissions and transfer cases become thicker, making it more difficult to mesh gears properly.

In the case of the standard transmission, it can become quite difficult to move the shift lever in low temperatures. The binding is caused by the synchronizer reacting to the thicker oil, which causes it to bind at times.

When this occurs we usually press on the shift lever with more force, but this can damage a synchronizer. To avoid this condition, I would suggest installing synthetic oil in the transmission and transfer case. Synthetic oils have two superior benefits over fossil oils: they are five times more slippery, dissipate heat more rapidly, and stay fluent in extremely low temperatures.

Both the slipperiness and fluent properties of the synthetic oils greatly reduce synchronizer binding in low temperatures. Reducing binding will add many more years of trouble-free operation to transmissions and transfer cases.

“Be careful to replace the fossil oil with correct synthetic oil”

Good Choice

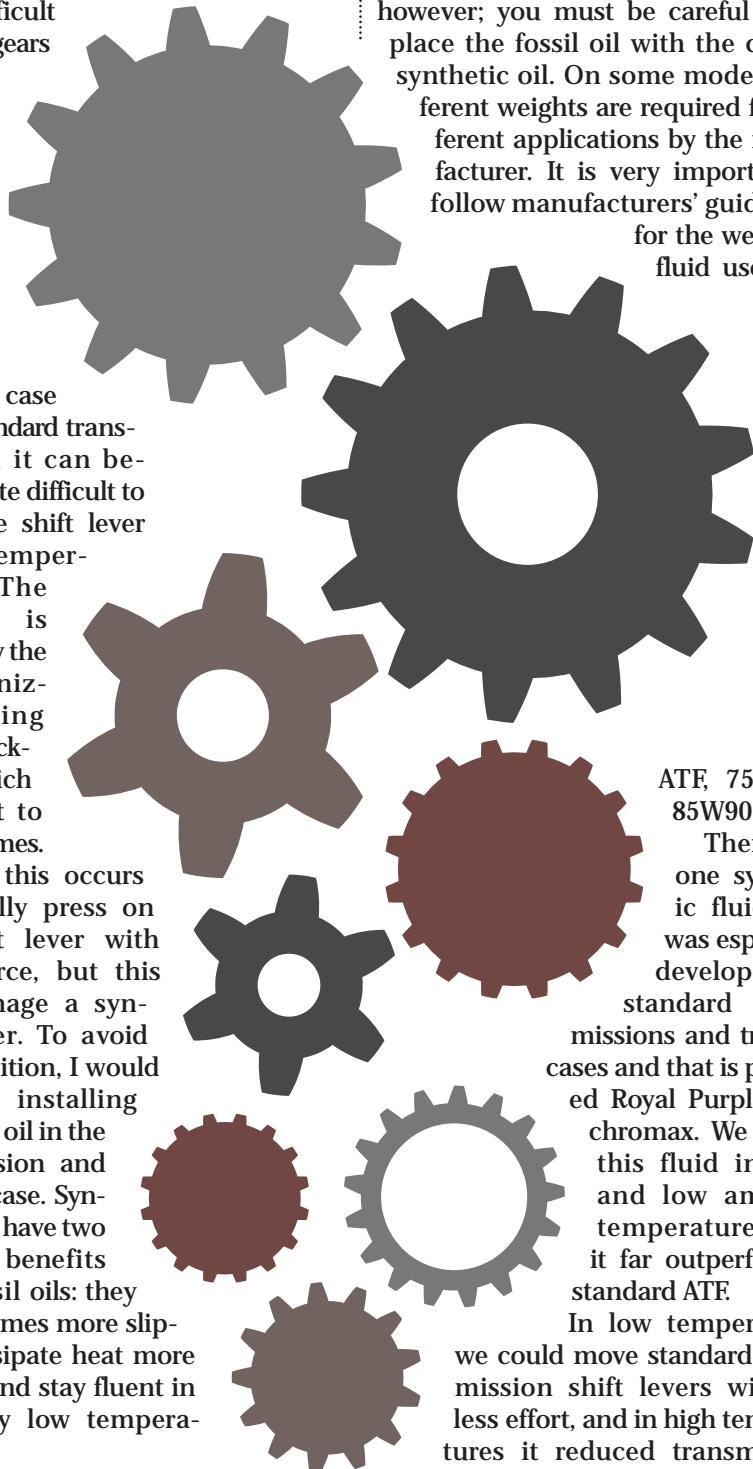
Not all synthetic oils are the same, however; you must be careful to replace the fossil oil with the correct synthetic oil. On some models, different weights are required for different applications by the manufacturer. It is very important to follow manufacturers' guidelines for the weight of fluid used, i.e.

ATF, 75W140, 85W90, etc.

There is one synthetic fluid that was especially developed for standard transmissions and transfer cases and that is patented Royal Purple Synchronmax. We tested this fluid in high and low ambient temperatures and it far outperformed standard ATF.

In low temperatures we could move standard transmission shift levers with far less effort, and in high temperatures it reduced transmission heat significantly. In most cases synthetic oils are very expensive but Royal Purple Synchronmax is priced fairly at \$5.75 per quart.

Even if you are not having a problem, I would consider using a syn-



See TOW TECH, page 26

CUSTOMER SERVICE

Surfin' & Service

One towman's views on how to succeed in business

By Torrey Meeks

When Erik Stewart started in the towing industry, he was a basic light-duty operator making \$250 a week. From there he climbed to medium and heavy duty, increasing his pay. Eventually, he moved on to Savatech Corporation, where he is currently the Product Sales Manager at the U.S. headquarters in Florida.

These days, Stewart advises Savatech customers around the world on which of the company's airbag lift systems works best for the job. Besides the towing industry, he does a lot of work with fire, rescue, and military ops organizations who want the benefit of airbag systems for low-impact recovery.

When he's not working, he surfs off the Florida beaches to rejuvenate and recharge. "Every chance I get, I go out there," he said. "It keeps me sane. I could be having the worst day in the world, but when I go out into that ocean, catch three or four waves, get out and dry myself off, the whole day looks better."

Learning Curve

As to how he got to this point in his life, he said, "I gathered everything I could and just read it. I have a tendency to pay attention and study a lot. I have some college behind me, and I learned if you want to get ahead, you need to have knowledge. Knowledge is power."

But it won't get you far without a few other nuts and bolts, he added. All the information in the world is no good without an eye toward customer service. "Those relationships you build as a tower are important. You're the face of

your business," Stewart said. "Basically it comes down to what do you need, what do you want to do, and I'll give you my best opinion. If you need to go get something else from someone else, I'll send you there."

A good attitude at work, passion for the job, and doing your best go "directly down the line" to the customer.

See CUSTOMER SERVICE, page 26

Dangerous Error

Although Stewart has climbed up life's ladder a bit, the journey wasn't without its fair share of mistakes and learning experiences. On one of his extremely close calls, all that saved him was basic education and training.

He was by the side of the road recovering a cement truck. He'd just hooked up and begun winching down when things went south. "I was pulling with a single cable. I shouldn't have done that, but I was in a hurry and the chain broke," Stewart said. "The one thing I'd remembered to do right was hook with the throw going down, not throw going up."

When the chain snapped, the throw pulled into the ground rather than flying through the air. It ended up gouging a 100-foot furrow all the way to the bumper, where it hit it with enough force to dent the truck.

"That truck is still in service," he said, "but I got lucky because I did one thing right."



Erik Stewart instructs a responder team

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Bad Hangover

A tricky recovery on a treacherous hillside

By Gary Lund

At 1:30 a.m. last March, Godbout Auto Services of Kenora, Ontario received a call from the Ontario Provincial Police (OPP). Help was needed to recover a tractor-trailer that had rolled halfway down a steep, 60-foot embankment on the Trans-Canada highway. The caller described the vehicle as a “tractor-trailer hanging over the guard rails.”

Within 15 minutes, Nathan Godbout and his father Jami, the incident coordinators, arrived on scene with the company’s tandem and medium-duty wreckers. The temperature was mild and the road clear, but heavy fog hung in the area.

The tractor-trailer was lying on its passenger side with the wheels pointing towards the top of the hill. Essentially, it was upside down. The hillside was covered in blast rock, created when the highway was carved through Canadian Shield.

Step 1: Reduce Danger

The guard-rail cables were wrapped around the passenger side tires of the tractor and trailer and under severe tension. There was great danger that the cables might break and spring back, so the OPP officers, the Ministry of Transportation-Ontario (MTO) officers, and the incident coordinators decided to cut the cables approximately 200 feet away from where the tractor-trailer unit was suspended. There was a chance that this might cause the unit to continue rolling down the embankment but because of its position and the danger that the cables posed, it was impossible to secure it prior to cutting the cables.

The OPP closed the highway down and the crew simultaneously cut both cables where they were anchored in the ground. The cables whipped across the highway, flying nearly 500 feet. The tractor-trailer stayed put. The initial roll down the embankment created a small berm of blast rock, which was just enough to hold the unit.

Once the cables were cut, personnel were able to get closer to the casualty, but still had to deal with these conditions:

- The tractor-trailer was still in a very dangerous position.
- The roof of the trailer was bowed from the weight of the cargo. The roof was also torn open at the rear and could break at any moment, making the load very insecure.
- Blast rock had punctured the passenger-side wall of the trailer making it impossible to winch it up the embankment loaded. The cargo would have to be removed first.
- The tractor was damaged on the passenger side and on the roof.

- Both fuel tanks were empty (all the fuel leaked out) and the environmental team had been notified.
- The terrain around the tractor-trailer was comprised of very loose, sharp blast rock, making it dangerous to walk on.

Step 2: Plan & Prepare

By 4:00 a.m., the OPP decided that since the unit was not obstructing traffic and since the fog presented its own dangers, the recovery could wait for daylight. Security was set in place. The recovery was delayed a day since the fog persisted.

Meanwhile, the incident coordinators planned and prepared for the recovery. They secured the help of C.J. Edwards, a local crane company. They also arranged with a local hydro contractor (Lake of the Woods Electric) to obtain two hydro poles (each 55 feet long) that would span the length of the trailer, and would be used as a support for the roof. This would provide a safer structure for crew members, as offloading would require walking on the roof inside the trailer. A 20-man work crew and OPP traffic control were arranged for 8:00 a.m. the following morning.

The next morning, the crew members and subcontractors arrived at the scene with essential safety gear, recovery equipment, and tow trucks. They relieved security of their duties. The highway was kept open to one lane of traffic during the recovery.

See **BAD HANGOVER**, page 26



OUR LOST MEN
continued from page 20

ber accounted for seven percent of all fatal occupational injuries.

Harsher Laws

The driver who struck Hogg was charged with driving too fast for conditions and slapped with a fine of less than \$100. That's not enough, Harley said. Harley and other area towers

"He was an honest man making an honest living"

are making noise about seeking to have South Carolina's "move over" law enforced more strictly and arming the law with harsher penalties.

South Carolina is among the more than 40 states that have "move over" laws, which mandate that drivers slow down and, if possible, move over to a lane not adjacent to the emergency vehicle. South Carolina is also among the more than 20 states that count tow trucks as emergency vehicles.

"South Carolina has not enforced the law," Harley said. "What is an officer going to do? He's on the side of the road, outside his vehicle and gets clipped. He can't get in his car and give chase. There's no way for it to be enforced."

But the real rub comes in the penalties. According to the state's code of law, a violator is guilty of a misdemeanor and, upon conviction, must be

fined no less than \$300 but not more than \$500.

Harley would like to see South Carolina move in the path of its neighboring states. In 2006, North Carolina amended its law to increase citations from \$25 to \$250 and made felony charges applicable for serious injury or death. Activists in Georgia are pushing to raise the maximum violation fine there to \$600.

Too Close Too Often

Chambers said he likes how Missouri would have handled what happened to Hogg. "If you have an incident similar to this (in Missouri), the driver would be charged with vehicular homicide," he said.

Public awareness of the law is lacking, too. "They're not going to get over," said Chambers. "They're going to ride right over top of you. You feel that breeze. You can smell what cologne they have on."

Families for Roadside Safety, or FORS, has launched a public awareness campaign titled "Move Over South Carolina." Based in North Carolina, FORS was founded by the wife of a highway patrolman after two of his fellow state troopers were killed within a 20-month period.

Chambers has started conversations with a couple of state legislators, but he is having better luck at the municipal level. He has the ear of his city council after he helped craft local policy limiting the amount companies can charge in towing and storage fees after residents complained of exorbitant storage fees and business being uninsured for theft and damage.

Change is possible, but it takes work. That's a lesson these towmen take from Hogg's life.

Chambers counted Hogg as a friend. "He wasn't dealt a fair hand of cards in the beginning," he said. "He was a great family man. He was given a second chance he really took advantage of." 🚚



Header: Infinger

Lined up to pay tribute to Danny Hogg

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TOW TECH

continued from page 22

ic fluid to increase the service life of your standard transmission or transfer case. In many cases, transfer cases and standard transmissions are forgotten units for proper service.

Dan Montegari is the president of Precision Diesel Service. Reprinted with permission of M&S Technical Services, Inc. from their newsletter, published by Precision Diesel Service. For more information, call Precision Diesel Service at 631-756-2020 or send an email to pds14@earthlink.net

Drain & Flush

I suggest having transmissions, differentials, and transfer cases drained, flushed, and synthetic oils installed at the first 8500 miles. Performing this service at 8500 miles removes metals left from break-in, and installs a fluid that reduces wear and friction, dissipating heat more quickly. After this initial service, I would suggest draining the standard transmission, transfer case, and differential at least every 50,000 miles, or sooner if your vehicle is used for heavier towing. Keep in mind that oil is far less expensive than a unit replacement or overhaul.

Note: If your rear differential is Limited slip, don't forget the Limited slip additive.

CUSTOMER SERVICE

continued from page 22

he said. A tower who's passionate about the job and focused on doing good work will be better equipped to treat customers and employees well.

According to Stewart, "You should also learn something every day. Every time you climb up in that wrecker, make a point to learn something. When you stop learning there's a problem. There's no such thing as not learning anymore."

Staying Alive

By being prepared and thinking about safety, it's easier to do the simple things that save your life, Stewart said. When he took over management of his first tow shop, the first thing on his list was to keep his guys alive.

"We already knew towers were getting run over like raccoons out there," he said. "My company policy was: You go out there, if it's just a simple flat tire or another quick fix, it doesn't matter. Load it up and get off-highway, then change the tire. Don't spend time on interstate if you don't have to."

Stewart believes it comes down to paying attention to what makes sense. Take care of equipment: Wash it, grease it, check straps and chains, make sure your truck is in good working order. "In towing, we work on Murphy's law: Anything that can go wrong will go wrong," he said.

See CUSTOMER SERVICE, page 27

BAD HANGOVER

continued from page 24

"The cables whipped across the highway and flew nearly 500 feet"

Step 3: Tractor Recovery

C.J. Edwards's two cranes were positioned to support the trailer, while the tandem and medium-duty wrecker removed the tractor. The cranes held the bottom framework of the trailer to ensure there would be no movement during the tractor extraction.

Once the trailer was supported, personnel unpinned the tractor and pulled it on its side five feet away from the trailer. Then they righted the tractor on the embankment to prevent any further damage to it, and winched it up the embankment onto the highway.

Step 4: Secure The Trailer

Next, the medium-duty wrecker secured two winch cables to the front end of the trailer framework to allow one crane to release. The crane moved out of its position to allow the tandem wrecker to be positioned opposite the center of the trailer. The tandem wrecker secured a winch cable to the pockets of the fifth-wheel plate and to the suspension framing of the trailer. All other cables were released. The cranes were then positioned on the right and left of the tandem wrecker.

The hydro poles (on a trailer, strapped together) were positioned on the highway. The crane on the left of the tandem wrecker picked up the hydro poles using slings and moved them to the bottom of the trailer. Straps were then placed near the ends of the poles and hooked to the cranes. In concert, the cranes moved the poles into position to secure the roof of the trailer.

Once the poles were in place and proper angle and tension had been established by the cranes, it was safe to walk below the trailer to position heavy-duty straps. The straps were secured to the framework of the trailer (front and rear), then passed through small gaps between the blast rock and trailer, then pulled over top of the roof and poles, and attached to the tandem-wrecker winch cables.

The tandem's cables were released from their initial hold on the framework one at a time to hook directly to the straps. The load was now secure.

Step 5: Cargo Transfer

A staircase was built down to the damaged trailer doors, using pallets as landing areas. The work crew then formed a chain line from the damaged trailer to a new one, passing the cargo up the chain to be loaded onto the new trailer.

By 3:30 p.m., unloading of the damaged trailer cargo was complete and the new trailer had left the scene.

Step 6: Trailer Recovery

With the trailer unloaded, the hydro poles were secured with chains and bear traps at each end of the trailer. The cranes then released their hold on the poles. Using the tandem wrecker, the operator winched on the straps that had been previously set in place and righted the damaged trailer on the side of the steep bank to prevent any further damage.

Once the trailer was on its wheels (held by the tandem wrecker), personnel connected the crane to a spreader bar secured to the front of the trailer. With the front of the trailer suspended in the air and the tandem wrecker holding the trailer from sliding down the bank, the medium-duty wrecker winched the rear of the trailer up onto the highway.

Once the trailer suspension was on the shoulder, the tandem wrecker released its cables. The tandem wrecker then moved to allow the crane to swing the front of the damaged trailer onto the highway.

By 5:30 p.m. the damaged trailer was on the highway. The hydro poles were then unchained and lifted from the trailer roof and returned to the pole trailer. The damaged trailer was then prepped to be towed by the tandem wrecker to Godbout's Kenora compound.

By 7:00 pm all equipment and personnel were back at the compound.

Gary Lund is a Vancouver, British Columbia-based freelance writer and editor, and an active member of the Editors' Association of Canada. Contact him at lundwriting@shaw.ca or 604-267-7460. The author adapted this story from the incident report prepared by Nathan and Anna Godbout. This article was previously published in Tow Canada magazine.



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CUSTOMER SERVICE

continued from page 26

He feels the industry as a whole has gone in good directions: There's more education, better equipment, and top-notch guidelines for good recovery practices than ever before.

But there's still work to be done. "We've got kids coming in who've

and you're relying on a team, make everyone feel like part of the team. He's found that when everyone feels like they belong, that good feeling is passed on to customers.

"A lot of people look at towers like a knight in shining armor," Stewart said. "Yes, we tow cars when police arrest people, but the biggest part of what we do is service and those people we're helping deserve the best service." ❖

***"When you
stop learning
there's a problem"***

never driven a mechanical wrecker, and they're cutting their teeth on 50- or 60-ton rotators," he said. "They're missing out on some of the structure of recovery, because our roots are in rigging and mechanical advantage."

In This Together

Stewart sees a lot of infighting and fragmentation in towing that hurts the industry as a whole. While towers occasionally make great friends across state lines at conventions, many times they can't stand the shop down the street or around the corner. He pointed out that just because someone's in the same business in the same area doesn't mean you have to treat them like the enemy.

"We need to stop looking at each other like lowlifes and stop fighting," Stewart said. "It's counterproductive, for the industry and business. We're not gods out here. We all put our pants on the same way."

In his own life, he makes a point to listen to what his whole crew has to say without cutting anyone off or getting angry. At the same time though, Stewart doesn't pull punches.

"I've been the guy pulling people out and I've been the guy getting pulled out. I try to keep things simple and straightforward," he said. "You always want to better your position in life, but you don't want to be a politician and crush other people and walk all over them for your benefit in the process."

Stewart feels that the key is to infuse a sense of camaraderie and brotherhood. If you're not a sole proprietor



A surfing Stewart catches a curl

Two Top Tasks



Savatech bags at work

The first two things Erik Stewart set out to do when he joined Savatech approximately three years ago was engineer diversity into the company's air-bag lift systems and get good customer service in place. He wanted a versatile product that could be used as easily in towing as fire, rescue, or military ops and he wanted to deliver good training to customers.

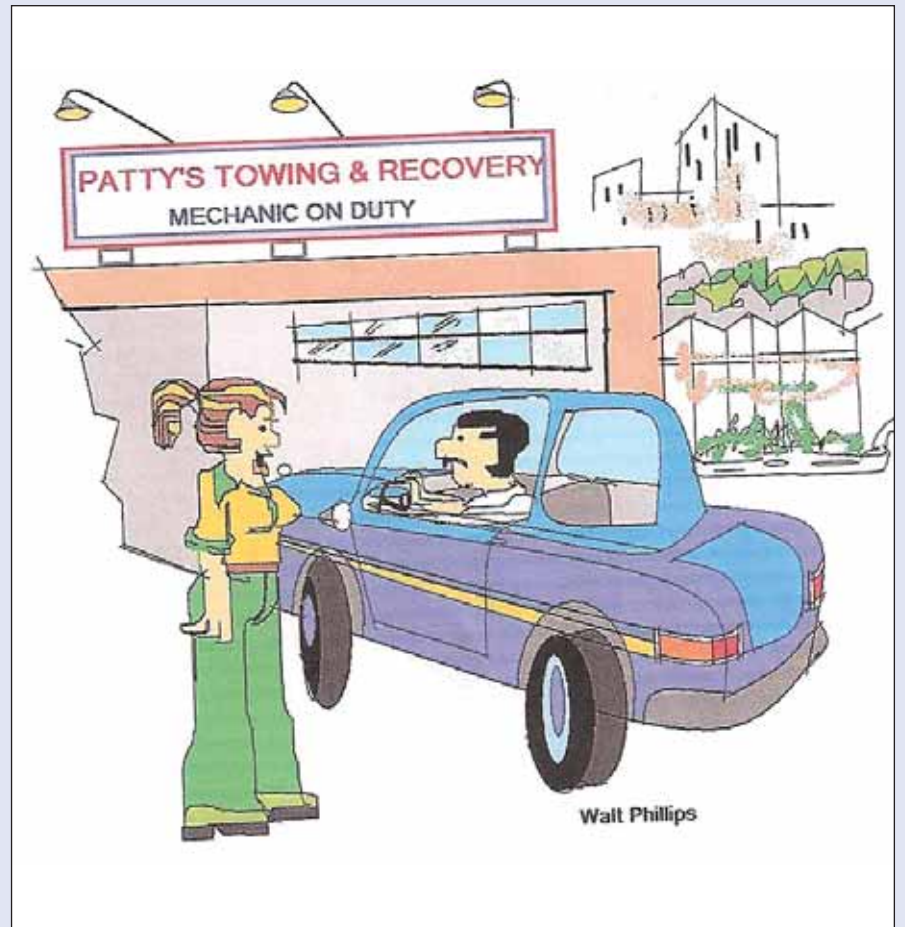
"We do what we have to do to keep our customers happy. A good way to start with airbags is to get a small set. And don't forget to shop around," Stewart said. "Don't take the first ones that come across your screen. Make sure you get a big bang for your buck. A lot of guys want to get them cheap, but understand these bags aren't cheap to produce."

While he's in the business of selling airbags and stands solidly behind his product, this doesn't mean he believes his product is best for everyone. He encourages people to look at all the airbag options available, talk to the customer service reps at the company, and look into the training offered by the company when buying a set.

"We provide training when people buy bags from us," Stewart said. "We actually send someone out. We show you how to set up, how to use it, make sure everything works, and answer any questions."

If a tower is looking into buying a set, they can expect to spend between \$21,000 to \$30,000, Stewart said. That sounds like a whopper up front, but after two or three big jobs, the bags pay for themselves, he noted.

"Remember, this is a big investment, so test the sales staff's knowledge before you buy," he said. "Do they have something besides a still picture of their product to show you? Will they come out to show you how to use the equipment? Will they give you tech support? Or do they just sell it and then walk away?"



***"I am the mechanic.
You got a problem with that?"***

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#1373 White 2008 k/w T-270, 260 h/p, shift by wire automatic, loaded, aluminum wheels, Chevrolet S-14 Steel 21.5", aluminum blade rails, air free wheel add'l key cuts, all lighting and options.

Red 97 F-450, 7.3 dsl, 5 spd., xl, a/c, p/w, 84" c/a aluminum twin line wrecker and 4,000lb. wheel lift. 10K winches, all lighting and options.

#1366 White 2008 int'l 4400 Maxforce 285 h/p, auto, 33,000 g.v.w., 136" c/a, loaded, aluminum wheels, Chevrolet 1016 twin line integrated aluminum body 16 ton wrecker 12,000 lb. Underlift, 15,000 lb. Dp planetary winches, all lighting and options.

Black 1996 Int'l 4700, T-4 175 h/p dsl, 5 spd., a/c, p/w, 61,000 miles, Challenger 10 ton twin line wrecker & 6,000 lb. wheel lift, all lighting and options.

#1349 Black 2007 Frltr M2, air brks/prk, air ride, merc. 210 h/p, auto trans, 22.5 rubber exst brk, aluminum wheels, loaded, Chevrolet S-14 Steel, 21.5" stationary Light pylon, r/rail, air free wheel. All lighting and options.

#1370 White 2007 Frltr M2, air brks/prk, air ride, merc. 210 h/p, auto trans, exst brk, loaded, Chevrolet Aluminum 21.5" blade aluminum rails, air free wheel, All lighting and options.

#1367 White 2008 int'l 4300 Maxforce, 225 h/p, automatic, loaded, Air brakes, 108" c/a, Chevrolet 512 twin line 12 ton Wrecker and 8,000 lb. underlift. All lighting and options.

09 White Int'l 4300, Maxforce, 230 h/p, auto, loaded, 19.5 tires, Chevrolet 21" steel S-10, stationary pylon all lighting and options.

#1311 Red 2007 Frltr M2, air brks/prk, air ride, merc. 210 h/p, auto trans, exst brk, loaded, Chevrolet Aluminum 21.5" blade aluminum rails, air free wheel, All lighting and options.

#1377 White 2008 F-350 extended cab pick-up, diesel, automatic, loaded, NEW Dynamic Snatcher integrated Auto Load Slip-in Wheel lift.

#1360 White 2007 Frltr M2, air brks/prk, air ride, merc. 210 h/p, auto trans, exhaust brake, aluminum wheels, loaded, Chevrolet Aluminum 21.5" blade aluminum rails, air free wheel, All lighting and options.

#1342 Red 2008 F-550, 6.4 diesel, automatic, XLT, loaded, Chevrolet 408 tva twin line integrated Wrecker and AutoGrip, Stainless Steel Body all lighting and options.

#1359 White 2007 Frltr M2, air brks/prk, air ride, merc. 210 h/p, auto trans, exhaust brake, aluminum wheels, loaded, Chevrolet Steel 21.5", r/rails, air free wheel, All lighting and options.

1671c Black 2003 k/w T-300, cat 250 h/p, 6 spd, a/c, pwr/pass. Side window, pwr mirrors, tilt wheel, aluminum wheels, Jerrdan 21" steel removable aluminum rails, l.e.d.s, all lighting and options, 24,691 miles.

1690c White 05' Frltr M2, merc. 210 h/p, automatic, loaded, 19.5 rubber, Chevrolet 21.5" aluminum, r/rails, (6) add'l key slots, all lighting and options.

INEXPENSIVE FLAT BED \$14,900
95 INT'L 4700, T4 175 H/P Diesel, 5 SPD, A/C, P/S, P/W, Tilt, Tele Wheel, 21, 440 G.V.W., Chevrolet 19 Aluminum 2 car carrier with wheel lift, (2) 49" Aluminum tool boxes, Cable tension/Free Wheel/Roller, All Lighting and Options.

93 F350 4X4, 7.3 Diesel Engine, XLT, 108K Miles, Challenger 10-ton Twin-Line, 5K Wheel Lift, Concept Boxes, 84", New Paint, Sling, Strobes, Rebuilt Wheel Lift, Lots of New Items, All Lighting & Options. Reduced!

4x4 EXTENDED CAB FORD CARRIER
04 F-550, 6.0 DSL, Auto, XLT, 141K, (SUPER CLEAN), Chevrolet 19' Aluminum 2 Car Carrier, R/BRDS, Stainless 1/4 Fenders, All Lighting and Options

4X4 FORD CARRIER
05 F-550, 6.0 DSL, Auto, XLT, 110K, (LIKE NEW), Century 19' Aluminum 2 Car Carrier, (2) 49" Boxes, L.E.D. Light Bar, Vulcan, Receivers and Scoop L-Arm

EXTENDED CAB FORD 650
04 WHITE F-650, XLT, 230HP Cummins, Automatic, Loaded, 150k, Chevrolet 21.5' Aluminum 2-Car Carrier, Removable Rails, All Lighting & Options.

97 FORD F450 XLT, 7.3 Diesel, 84" C/A, 5 SPD, 8-ton Alum. Body w/Twin 10K Winches, Double Doors Each Side, All Lighting & Options, Red, All New Injectors.

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WRECKER WITH SNOW PLOW \$6,500
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02 UD 2000, 6 CYL, Turbo, 6 SPD, 19,500, A/C, P/W, P/D, Air Park, Air Brakes, Tilt, 303K Miles, Vulcan 21" Steel 2 Car carrier with wheel lift. (New Clutch), All Lighting and Options \$23,900

CHEVY AUTO TRANS.
2002 Chevy 6500, CAT 210, Allison Auto, 132K Miles, Nice Shape, Loaded, Alum. Wheels, A/C, P/W, P/D, Heated Mirrors, 19.5 Tires, (2) 40 Gallon Tanks, Chevrolet Series 14 Two car Carrier and 4,000 LB wheel lift, 22 Deck, 14,000 LB Deck Capacity, All Lighting and Options. Special Pricing ask Jr. for Code 22

\$28,900 VERY CLEAN
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94 UD 8 6 CYL, Turbo, 6 SPD, 256K Miles, A/C, P/S, Tilt, Rubber ok, Jerr Dan 19' Aluminum Shark two car carrier and wheel lift. (4) Add'L D-Rings, Removable Rails, S 6, 500.

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NEW Ford 550 Units

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07 Ford F550, 4x4 - white loaded chassis, auto, diesel, 60 CA (vin 5762) \$37,792 for chassis, you install own unit

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2007 Chev C6500, White, Auto, Duramax diesel, GVW 26,000, 21' Vulcan Steel, removable rails (vin 3227) \$67,950

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2008 Dodge Ram 5500, 4 WHEEL DRIVE Black, Auto, Vulcan 810 auto loader (vin 4978) \$64,950

2008 Dodge Ram 5500, Black, Auto, Vulcan 810 auto loader (vin 5664) \$59,950

2008 Dodge Ram 5500, auto, 4 X 4, red, loaded chassis, Vulcan 807 (vin 9910) Building in Process

2008 Dodge Ram 5500, auto, white loaded chassis, 84CA (vin5510) ready to build

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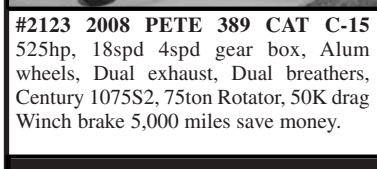
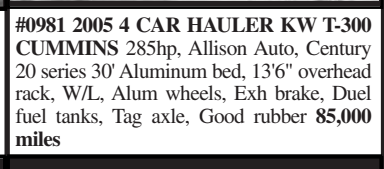


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