

# TRUCK TALK

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## DISTRACTED DRIVING

ARE YOU A PART OF THE PROBLEM OR THE SOLUTION?

Distracted driving has become the most talked about subject by safety professionals over the last several years and it appears, at least on the surface, that talking about it hasn't had much of an effect (makes you wonder how much of that talking was done on a cell phone, doesn't it?).

Distracted driving is defined by the US Department of Transportation as "any non-driving activity a person engages in that has the potential to distract him or her from the primary task of driving and increase the risk of crashing". Texting is considered by many to be the # 1 cause of distraction, but distracted driving frequently includes:

- Using a cell phone
- Eating and drinking
- Talking to passengers
- Grooming
- Reading - including maps
- Using a PDA or navigation system
- Watching a video
- Changing the radio station, CD or MP3 player.

Sadly, many have observed notebook computers affixed to brackets in cars, pickups and commercial motor vehicles, including class 8 trucks. I'm sure that enforcement authorities are told "I only use it when I'm parked" when roadside inspections are made but the cold, harsh reality is that it's probably not the complete truth. The point is that there are entirely too many entertainment opportunities for those who drive, none of which contribute to the primary function of the driver – TO DRIVE.

How big is the problem? The most appropriate answer to this question may be that no one really knows. Distracted driving has eclipsed drunk driving as the number one safety concern of the motoring public. If you were to read vehicular accident reports on a regular basis, a conclusion might be drawn that distraction as an accident cause is probably much higher than is being recorded due to state and municipality requirements that this behavior must be *observed* by an enforcement authority and (obviously) very few vehicular accidents are actually witnessed by authorities.

The Federal Motor Carrier Safety Administration (FMCSA) and many states are enacting regulations with stiff fines and penalties for those 'caught' operating a motor vehicle while texting or using a cell phone without a 'hands-free' device. The FMCSA fine for a commercial motor vehicle driver convicted of sending a text message while in motion is currently \$2,750, (in addition to any state or local penalties) and possible disqualification. In addition, the FMCSA fine to the carrier that the driver is employed by (or contracted to) is \$11,000. Currently, 30 states ban texting by drivers and 9 states require a hands-free device when the driver is talking while the vehicle is in motion. A hands-free requirement is under consideration by the FMCSA. These regulations are backed by some fairly stiff fines but many people feel that "they have to catch me to fine me" and have not adjusted their behavior to comply with the rules under which they operate.

The overall solution to much of this is in the hands of motor carriers to educate their drivers of not only the penalties but the dangers of distracted driving. In addition, this education should not be a one time video or PowerPoint, but an ongoing program with newsletters, hand-outs, daily reminders through dispatch and the total buy-in by every member of the company – not just the drivers. Some excellent training aids and visual materials can be obtained by logging on to <http://www.distracted.gov>. The National Safety Council has a complimentary Cell Phone Policy Kit which can be downloaded from: <http://www.nsc.org>. In addition, <http://www.focusdriven.org> has some complimentary information that is presented in an all ages/all drivers format.

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