Keeping the ‘family’ happy

Small-fleet owners use good pay, equipment and home time to attract loyal drivers. They say those are the bedrocks of retention, the top employment issue named in an Overdrive survey. BY TODD DILLS

Stacy Turner heads up all things relative to driver employment at the seven-driver Turner Transport open car hauling fleet based near Atlanta. One of those drivers, her husband and fellow company head Eric Turner, says that as far as retention goes, the fleet has little problem keeping its drivers on board. That’s largely due to something of a holy trinity of best practices that Stacy is quick to boil down in her interviews with driver prospects. She considers all who join to be family.

Want to keep a driver around for a long time? Give him “good equipment, good home time and good money,” says Turner driver Jay Dorris, paraphrasing Stacy’s central message. Turner’s haulers, with few exceptions, are home at least on the weekends, if not more often. If they’re not, it might be for a special occasion such as the fleet’s recent
trip to the Great American Trucking Show in Dallas, where Eric showed his Detroit Series 60-powered 2015 Peterbilt 389 glider in Overdrive’s Pride & Polish National Championship competition.

They brought the entire driver corps with the exception of one hauler who stayed behind to take care of ongoing business. On the weekend prior to GATS, “every last one of us worked both days so we could make it here,” Stacy said at the show in Dallas. “Guess what? No one complained about anything—it’s what we had to do to get the job done. We’re all team players.”

Retention issues are not so simply handled by other small fleets, if Overdrive’s spring 2016 Operational Survey is any indication. Retention was named by more than six in 10 respondents as one of the biggest issues in employing drivers.

Stacy Turner’s pay, equipment and home-time dictum also rings true for the other three fleets consulted for this story. All have found some measure of success by paying close attention to drivers’ needs.

Pay

At the 20-truck J&C Investments Inc. based in Garland, Texas, and with a location in Nebraska, owner Jeff Hardage says compensation is probably his biggest tool in keeping drivers happy. Paid on a mileage basis and running 3,000 to 3,500 miles weekly with multi-drop dry van freight, his drivers make $60,000 to $70,000 a year, Hardage says. The 16-driver fleet serves a primary customer as its central distributor in an area stretching from Texas into Ontario, Canada. That customer closes down on holidays, so most of those are paid days off for the drivers, he says.

Such an income beats the company driver norm. Average income is in the low $40,000s, according to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, or between $50,000 and $60,000, based on analyses of the pay packages of medium-size and large carriers by the National Transportation Institute.

It’s also near what Schneider National co-founder Don Schneider once famously said drivers needed to make annually in truckload—$70,000—to alleviate large fleets’ recruiting and retention issues.

Richard DeForest, of owner-operator business services provider ATBS, cited that figure in an Overdrive’s Partners in Business seminar at GATS this year. However, it was 13 years ago when Schneider, who passed in 2012, said it. With inflation applied, it’d be more like $93,000 today.

The situation has been one in which “the rewards don’t match the requirements of the job,” DeForest says—and that won’t change until freight rates support more income for the most important part of the supply chain: the driver.

Small fleets such as J&C have hit a sweet spot, keeping rates strong with a primary customer and establishing solid relationships with brokers on select lanes for freight such that “they pick up the phone and call us” when an opportunity arises. Contract rates with the customer are good enough that “if a trip out is within a 300-mile radius” of their locations, “it’s not worth back-hauling,” so drivers often return empty.

The 40-truck Fleenor Bros. fleet hauls hazmat explosives and other commodities out of headquarters in Joplin, Mo. Many of its 65 drivers run team. During the 2009-10 recession, “we had to cut everyone’s pay, but not really significantly,” says part-owner Kyle Cousins. “We’ve gotten it back now and even a little more, but we’re trending toward more incentive-driven pay increases.” Until recently, he says, the company didn’t have a safety bonus.

The move to tie pay increases to more performance-based measures, he believes, gives drivers recognition when it’s deserved. It’s helped retention because “drivers like to see that they’re getting paid for everything that they do.”

J&C has moved to a guaranteed detention pay system in which drivers receive $20 an hour after two hours waiting at a dock, regardless of whether
that rate is collected from the customer. Other fleets interviewed for this story have similar policies.

Augusta, Ga.-based Cadle Trucking maintains such a system for its six drivers. Owner-operator Ben Cadle also has instituted within the last year a weekly minimum guarantee to cover drivers during slow periods for flatbed freight in his operation as an agent for Bennett Motor Express. Instituted about a year ago when flat freight slowed down considerably, the policy guarantees $850 a week plus vacation and holiday pay, among other perks, Cadle says.

He’s had two drivers for seven years each. He hopes the new policy delivers a reality that all his drivers won’t “get anything any better anywhere else.”

Equipment

Turner Transport’s flagship 2015 Peterbilt 389 isn’t the only show-worthy rig in the fleet. “All my trucks are chromed out,” says Eric Turner. “Three Volvo 780s, two Freightliner Coronados and two Peterbilts.”

The opportunity to operate top-shelf equipment encourages longevity at Turner and elsewhere. Drivers who’ve stuck by the company through times good and bad are rewarded with first pick of new equipment.

That’s also the case at Cadle Trucking, where Cadle says those seven-year veterans “get the new trucks” or the choice of other equipment.

But equipment also can be a downside for retention, as Turner makes clear. Some of his late-model units have had issues with fuel mileage and emissions systems, creating undue downtime for his drivers, who make most of their money on percentage commissions. The fleet has begun investing in gliders, working with Fitzgerald Glider Kits of Crossville, Tenn.

Turner reports no significant problems with those units to date, and a boost in fuel mileage of close to 2 mpg over other trucks in the car-hauling operation.

Home time

It’s a common small-fleet practice to hire within the area in which the company is headquartered. Many operate on an out-and-back model that gets drivers home for the weekend, if not even more frequently.

The Turners believe this dynamic is critical to their success. Turner driver Dorris underscores the big-happy-family dynamic by noting how close the spouses of Turner drivers are with each other, Stacy and the whole team.

Cadle also typically gets everybody in for the weekend, which also helps in rounding up all the equipment at the same time for maintenance. “I’ll routinely walk around when they come back in to be sure I don’t see anything wrong with them that the mechanics might have missed,” he says.

Cadle says if you treat a driver like family, you end up with loyalty in the long run, and J&C Investments owner Hardage agrees. “We don’t have a lot of turnover, because we treat our guys
**WHERE AVAILABLE CDL HOLDERS LIVE**

This map shows the resident location of total 2015 CDL-holding driver applicants per capita, by state, according to the BestDriverJobs.com portal and associated network sites. Offering trucking employers access to driver leads to initiate conversations about potential employment, affiliated sites are owned by Overdrive publisher Randall-Reilly.

“We get around 11,000 applications a month,” says Randall-Reilly Digital Services Director Chip Aldridge. Many come from initial points of contact through job searches, ad aggregators such as Indeed.com, Facebook and Google-served ads. Trucking companies then purchase leads based on geographic need or by lane. Customers include many of the largest truckload fleets but also smaller carriers with targeted needs. “We have about 200 clients per month purchasing this type of service,” says Aldridge. “Half of the 200 clients are 150 trucks or less. I’d say 10 percent are in the 50-truck range.”

Deep-South states are among those most densely populated by CDL holders treading the waters for employment. Mississippi ranked the highest, but Wyoming further afield was not far behind. Vermont and Massachusetts, on the other hand, showed the lowest per-capita density of applicants.

To access a graph showing how this has changed year by year since 2008, and to see total 2015 applicant volume distribution, search “driver population heat maps” at OverdriveOnline.com.

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**Small-fleet owners’ challenges**

- Retention: Hanging on to good drivers 62%
- Maintaining state and federal compliance 43%
- Paying drivers adequately 36%

Small-fleet owners’ challenges

In Overdrive’s spring 2016 Operations Survey, small-fleet owners among poll respondents named these three issues as most significant to their role as employer. Other choices (respondents could choose up to three) included recruiting (14 percent), keeping up with drug/alcohol screens (7 percent) and maintaining payroll information for taxes/other purposes (7 percent). Five percent reported no problems with employing drivers.

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**KEEPS THE ‘FAMILY’ HAPPY**

“Like family.” He gives the example of two drivers who recently were taken off the road during battles with cancer. “We keep paying them a salary.” They deserve it, he adds: “They’ve been with me for 20-plus years.”

When Stacy Turner brings a new driver on board, that driver’s comfort level is of paramount importance, she says. “Most of the time, we’ll go buy that person a particular truck” if they haven’t had someone leave a truck empty.

Drivers’ needs should take precedence over equipment decisions, respondents to Overdrive’s survey emphasized. Asked whether, when hiring to expand a small fleet, it made more sense to hire the driver before buying the truck, most respondents said the driver is more important.

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**I try to be honest and straightforward with my guys.**

— **Ben Cadle** on benefits, including detention pay and regular home time

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**2015 CDL driver applications per 100,000 people**

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<th>25-35</th>
<th>15-24</th>
<th>5-14</th>
<th>0-4</th>
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Cadle Trucking, Augusta, Ga.
At Overdrive’s press time in early September, owner Ben Cadle was for the first time on the verge of hiring a driver outside of the 50-mile radius around his center of operations in Augusta. Traditionally, given the hands-on nature of his maintenance operation to control costs and enhance peace of mind, “my driver selection is limited to this area.” That can be a “huge problem for small carriers” such as his. “You only have a certain pool to pull from.”

He’s also limited by an insurance-driven stipulation from Bennett Motor Express, where his fleet is leased, that no hires can be made without demonstrating two years of flatbed experience. He’s relied a lot on word of mouth and referrals. He offered a $100 referral bonus for a time, but has since experimented with a billboard near Augusta. When that drove little interest, he moved the signage to a locally operated tractor-trailer. “I got a lot of responses to that,” including a solid hire with about a year’s tenure at the company now.

Cadle also has used his personal Facebook profile to advertise open positions to his trucking friends. It provided his initial contact with the last driver he hired in his area.

Percy Transport co-owner Tom Stawinski devised this map, showing the company’s primary produce lanes, to help in recruiting.

Percy Transportation, Mt. Prospect, Ill.
Suburban Chicago-based Percy Transport owns four trucks and works regularly with 10 owner-operators as a dispatch service.

Almost all of its drivers come from the Polish-American community around its base of operations.

To date, says 22-year-old co-owner and former Coyote Logistics broker Tom Stawinski, they’ve relied on referrals from current drivers and owner-operators as well as advertising in Polish and Russian newspapers, but Stawinski’s treading into the waters of online ads and social media as the carrier looks to expand.

This year, he built a graphic map to illustrate primary lanes for the company’s loads outbound from Chicago for the early part of the produce season. He shared it via the LinkedIn social network in tandem with recruiting ads showing the company’s direct-deposit immediate post-trip pay options for drivers.

Fleenor Bros., Joplin, Mo.
Part-owner Kyle Cousins has seen growing pains firsthand in recent years. The Fleenor Bros. hazmat-hauling fleet’s performed well in its niche and has grown by a third in the last year alone, hiring more than a dozen new drivers for its 40 mostly team-driven trucks.

“The driver pool is not very deep anymore,” he says. “Primarily what we go after is teams. That makes the pool a bit smaller. Teams with hazmat that can get into Canada – it gets smaller still.”

When Fleenor was half the size it is today, “we heavily relied on referrals,” Cousins says. “After a while, those kind of dried up.”

They’ve tried a variety of things with some success:

• Putting company contact information on the back of dry van/tank trailers. “We have fairly nice-looking trucks, even our trucks that aren’t going to the shows. Now, if the number is attached to that truck, it gives that guy a first-hand look at what he’d be driving,” and an impetus to inquire.

• Avoiding one restrictive qualification. Cousins says “we relaxed our requirements” relative to Canada in order to deepen the pool of possibilities among drivers.

• Ramping up social media efforts via a company Facebook page. “In the last year to 18 months, we’ve really hit social media. That generates a lot of traffic. I don’t know that it necessarily generates particularly good traffic,” but numerous conversations have been initiated there, Cousins says. Drivers messaging the company via the page are encouraged to call direct for one of the few conversations that typically precede any prospect’s visit to the Joplin headquarters.

How small fleets find drivers

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Method</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Referral from a customer/other</td>
<td>46%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>third-party business</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Referral through other drivers,</td>
<td>17%</td>
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<tr>
<td>family, community</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Newspaper ads/Craigslist</td>
<td>5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Online trucking job ads/boards</td>
<td>5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unsolicited inquiry from drivers</td>
<td>5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social media, other</td>
<td>5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I’ve never hired a driver</td>
<td>19%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Nothing comes close to referrals when small-fleet owners need to hire drivers. “I’ve tried Monster.com” and other online job sites, says J&C Investments owner Jeff Hardage, “but we couldn’t ever do any good with them. What you end up getting is rotation out of other fleets. Those that didn’t make it somewhere else will probably not make it here, either.” J&C pays current drivers a $2,500 bonus if they refer a driver who stays a year.