

5

minute safety talk



Driving Defensively

Try to put yourself in another person's shoes. Few people know what it's like to drive different types vehicles. Whether your employees drive a motorcycle, a slow moving farm tractor, an 18-wheel tractor trailer or a high-performance sedan, they all can learn something from the drivers around them. Those who do drive a number of vehicle types may be the safest drivers around.

Think about it. Though you may have driven alongside all or any of these vehicles, you can't fully appreciate what it's like to drive on unless you've been behind the wheel. Every driver's view of the road, as well as the ability to stop suddenly or swerve around a pothole, is different.

A little information and patience, however, can go a long way when you share the road with different — sized vehicles. Drivers need to keep in mind the limitation and the capabilities of all the vehicles around them.

Motorcycles are small, fast and easy to maneuver on clean pavement. A motorcyclist can sometimes avoid potential collisions because motorcycles are easier to maneuver than other vehicles. However, motorcyclists also share the greatest risk of personal injury if they get caught in a collision. Slippery, wet or gravel conditions can be hazardous, so drivers of other vehicles should give motorcyclists a wide berth. While slow-moving vehicles such as combines or tractors cannot react quickly, sometimes time is on their side. The vehicle's slow pace gives the chance to plan how to react.

Seeing is believing

Car drivers and motorcycle drivers have better side vision than a truck driver. Truck drivers can see more than cars and motorcycles when they look forward because they sit higher up. But, the larger and longer the truck, the less the driver can see from behind.

Car drivers often have no idea how large the blind spots are on trucks. Just as a trucker can blind a fellow motorist with his high beams — in on-coming traffic or from behind — the driver of a car can blind a truck driver. Regardless of weather conditions; be aware of the effect bright lights may have on other drivers.

Cars have shorter stopping distances and, like motorcycles, greater maneuverability than trucks. With trucks, the heavier the truck, the more stopping distance it requires. If truck drivers try to stop suddenly, the weight of a heavy load can force a truck forward. This makes it impossible for even the best of truck drivers to stop in time. And because some trucks have a higher center of gravity, it's easier to roll a truck than a car if the truck takes a turn too quickly. To eliminate these situations, all drivers should avoid tailgating.

Defensive driving puts you in control

Since riding a motorcycle is far more dangerous than driving a car or truck, the National Safety Council suggests that drivers put extra following distance between their vehicles and motorcycles. "Also, be very careful around individuals who ride a cycle without a helmet or other protected equipment," says Jim Solomon, manager of training.

To drive defensively, use a space cushion, make your vehicle visible to other drivers and allow yourself time to make decisions.

When you drive near a slow-moving vehicle, the National Safety Council's defensive driving courses suggest three tactics to use:

- Stay back far enough to see around it.
- Don't become impatient.
- When it's safe to pass, give the vehicle plenty of room.

Many trucks crashes occur when trucks back up. To avoid this trap, drivers should get out and check the back and sides so that the can judge clearance on all sides.

On the road, drivers of smaller vehicles should recognize that a truck turning one way will sometimes first swing the other way in order to make the turn. Truck drivers sharing the road with smaller, faster vehicles must understand that other drivers may be in a hurry to pass them so as not to be held back in traffic.

The Council offers tips on how to drive defensively around large vehicles:

- Don't drive in their blind spots.
- Don't tailgate or cut in too soon after you pass.
- Don't crowd the vehicle.
- Be prepared for wind gusts when you pass.

Professional drivers of heavy trucks and tractors trailers know that their vehicles push a block of air ahead of them and around the sides, which causes a slight vacuum of air behind. Truckers call this turbulence. Inexperienced drivers, especially driver of rental vehicles, may not know how to deal with the turbulence and could veer off the road or into on-coming traffic.

Navigating around nonprofessionals

Nonprofessional drivers require special consideration by other drivers, says Dan Waller, Ryder's National Safety Council manager for its consumer division. Waller develops training programs used to teach nonprofessional drivers how to drive the rental truck fleet. He says renters often are tired from driving long hours in unfamiliar vehicles.

"Sometimes the nonprofessionals try to drive the rental trucks as if they're driving cars. If a driver applies the brakes of a truck like a car, the brakes will lock up and the vehicle will skid." He suggests that trucks drive under the posted speed limit.

Before a new Ryder customer sits behind the wheel, says Waller, "we ask them to visually compare the vehicle with a car — walk around and examine it. If they look closely, they'll see that the size of the vehicle affects the turning radius and clearance from overhead structures."

If you drive defensively, know and respect your vehicle and give courtesy to other drivers on the road, you'll be able to share the road with vehicles of any size and drivers of all abilities.