

# STRAIGHT TALK SMART STRATEGIES

VOLUME 4

**A guide to growth and  
profitability for small fleets  
and owner-operators**

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## Straight Talk; Smart Strategies

Welcome to our final installment of Straight Talk, Smart Strategies reports for 2015.

With this report we conclude our focus on the profitability and growth strategies for Canada's small fleets and owner-operators.

As mentioned in our previous report, small fleets and owner-operators are a vital part of Canada's trucking industry. Our annual Equipment Buying Trends Survey shows this segment of the industry is once again looking to renew its truck fleet after spending several years on the sidelines. The economic outlook is also improving but seizing the opportunities of a growing economy will require adopting the right strategies going forward. There are many ways to grow a company; isolating the most profitable ones is critical to success.

This installment includes interviews with some of the nation's most successful owner-operators as they share their secrets to success; how to effectively calculate cost per mile; and an insightful feature on the kinds of equipment you should be spending money on now to save money later.

Our first installment, available on [www.trucknews.com](http://www.trucknews.com), included advice on how to stay profitable in good times and bad; what to consider before adding to your fleet size; and why buying used may be a smart option.

Both are brought to you once again in partnership with Michelin North America (Canada) Inc.

And there is more to learn in the months ahead. I also encourage you to turn to the special Knowledge Centre entitled Growing your Business we have created for you on [www.trucknews.com](http://www.trucknews.com) for more features and informative videos about small fleets and owner-operators. A downloadable copy of our first report is also available in this Knowledge Centre. We will be updating the Knowledge Centre regularly with fresh material. For those of you looking for a social media fix, we've got plenty of that too. Watch for tweets on helpful tips and statistics related to growing your business from all of our editors at Transportation Media.

We've worked hard to produce a multi-media educational package that allows you to learn and thrive in the years ahead.

I hope you've enjoyed it.

**Lou Smyrlis**  
*Publisher & Editorial Director*  
*Transportation Media*



### INSIDE THIS ISSUE

- 4 SECRETS TO SUCCESS:**  
They are the nation's best owner-operators. All of them winners of the prestigious Truck News Owner-Operator of the Year Award. We've brought five of them together to share their thoughts on what it takes to achieve success in a business getting tougher every year.
- 8 REALITY CHECK:**  
The actual cost of operation of a typical highway tractor seems to be a mystical thing. It shouldn't be. Our report, written by a seasoned small fleet owner, spells out how to align your earnings with a realistic cost per mile. It's the only way to remain profitable.
- 10 IT ALL BOILS DOWN TO PHYSICS:**  
Running trucks is an expensive business. Learn how to leave a little more money in your pocket by getting the four main factors driving fuel economy working for you.



# SECRETS TO SUCCESS

## George Sutherland: Making his own good luck

George Sutherland wanted to see the country. As he put it, he wanted to be an owner-operator “to do what I thought I could do on my own, having more choice about what I can do versus being a company driver.” The reality, however, was quite different. “You just become a glorified company driver,” he says. Or worse, because a company driver doesn’t have to drum up business.

Fortunately, Sutherland wasn’t afraid of hard work. “I’m a workaholic, with my eye on details, knowing the bottom line, making sure things are mechanically up to snuff,” he said, noting he keeps his eye on safety and on building and maintaining good relationships with the people he works with. As for how he markets himself, he said “through key relations. I’ve been lucky to meet the right people at the right times, to find different work. It almost falls in my lap, it seems like. I’ve been very lucky.”

One makes one’s own luck, it’s said, and in Sutherland’s case he gets work because he’s a known commodity. “Word-of-mouth, mostly, that I work hard and that I can get the job done and safely.” He works around Toronto now, with Bison Transport. “They put up all the client work,” he said. Before Bison, he worked with a small outfit where “there was a mixture of us and them working together to get the work.”

Sutherland helps keep costs down by making sure his equipment is current. “I don’t usually keep my trucks for more than four or five years,” he said. “That way we don’t run into the bigger repair bills.” While he does some mechanical work himself, “it’s key to have a good working relationship with a garage, where you can communicate your problems and they understand them,” he said.

His advice to anyone contemplating the life of an owner-operator is “go to a proper accredited driving school, then become a company driver for a good, reputable company.” There, he said, you can learn the ropes and “if you think you have the knowledge, the will-



## What does it take to achieve success as an owner-operator? Past winners of the Truck News Owner-Operator of the Year Award share their secrets.

BY JIM BRAY

power to become an owner-operator, go for it because you can make a good living.” Remember to put enough money aside to take care of your truck first, though. “You have to make sure that you can take care of your equipment to run down the road safely,” he said. “Your paycheck comes afterwards.”

An owner-operator also has to be “open and flexible to what has to be done at a particular time. You may not want to do (a job), but that’s what’s available – so you go out and do the best you can. Sometimes you do some tough jobs and then some easy jobs come by.”

If he had to do it again, Sutherland wouldn’t change anything. “I really enjoyed it,” he said, “and I’ve enjoyed every employer that I’ve ever worked with over the 20 years.”

## Motor Rosenau: Parlaying business into a vacation plan

Michael “Motor” Rosenau of Calgary, the 2009 Truck News Owner-Operator of the Year, no longer wears that hat, but he’s taken what he learned during his O/O period and used it as a stepping stone so he can slow down, smell the coffee – and spend half his time basking in the sunny Okanagan.

But he couldn’t have done it without first building his business, and that meant not biting off more than he could chew. “The first thing was to not have large overhead start to with,” Rosenau said. “I didn’t buy brand-new trucks, but used ones; they’re inexpensive, so I didn’t drown myself in a large truck payment.” He also found good places to work. “You want a bigger, more reputable company to work for, where you know where your paycheck comes from – because if that falls behind, so do you.”

Then there’s maintenance. “If you don’t that keep that up,” he said, “it’s going to break you in the end because you’ll be spending more money on things that get worse as you go.” He said he’d attack small maintenance problems whenever they came up so they didn’t grow to something big, and “neither one of the trucks I owned ever left me on the side of the road.” It’s also important to keep insurance costs low. “You have to keep yourself clean so you can afford your insurance,” he said.

## Dale Holman: Too young? Bah!

Dale Holman started his career with a Triumph. The former O-O of the year and Ontario Trucking Association Road Knight bought his first unit at age 19, after earning his license at 16 but finding it tough to find work. "I liked the industry," he said, "but no one would hire you until you're 21." If you had your own truck, however, "everybody wanted you." So Holman took his saved up loonies and invested them into a 1971 Ford that had been the equipment hauler for Canadian rock band Triumph. "It had a sleeper on it...and I just pictured me driving that truck. So I found out who owned it...and ended up buying it."

He spent a month working on the truck, then put it to work for a family friend. "I busted my ass for four months and turned it into a brand-new 1980 Peterbilt in December of 1979," he said. "I learned the business ropes: you make a mistake, you learn from it, regroup and work to overcome it."

Holman's mistakes included not paying enough attention to his fiscal fitness. "You try to grow too quick or you put the wrong guy in a truck or let a guy start taking the truck home and things like that," he said. "It's just little things, but it adds up."

Holman does most of his own maintenance, and would rather have a functioning older truck than a new one. "I'm still running an '88 Pete with a mechanical engine in it and I'm just finishing a restoration on a 2001 Freightliner," he said. "I invested 40 grand instead of going out and spending 140 grand on a new truck that isn't reliable. And I have no payments on the 40 grand; it was money in the bank."

Holman advises O-Os to keep an eye to the future, because nothing is stable. "It's at the point now where the contractor is to blame for everything," he said. "If a driver drops a trailer in the yard - maybe there's snow or something - that's a terminating offense, you're done, right there. That's just one example." He said this is why he works for more than one company, "to make sure



that, in the event something happens, I have an exit strategy. You always have to plan for tomorrow."

You also need to understand paperwork, from logbooks to customs and to the fine print on the contracts you sign. Mechanical aptitude doesn't hurt, either. Holman said he ensures his drivers have a working knowledge of their vehicle - battery cables, fuses, that kind of thing - so he has a better chance of walking them through a roadside problem. "They don't have to be a licensed mechanic or anything like that," he said.

Holman's bottom line for building a successful O-O operation? "It's all based on your reputation," he said. "And my insurance company liked me! I never had a claim. It's all about staying clean."

And the buck stops with you. "Your job isn't done when you punch out at the end of the day," Rosenau said. "You're going to be washing or greasing or doing whatever you have to do to keep the truck on the road. You can't just write up a cry sheet and file it and go home." There's also bookkeeping and various other tasks no one else can do. "You have to keep up on that." And don't forget safety. "I definitely work with (safety) in mind and got many awards for that," Rosenau said, noting he's had 20-plus years and 2.25 million kilometres of incident-free driving. "I practiced every day," he said. "I watched my Dad and how he drove as I grew up."

Rosenau isn't a fan of today's trucks. "If I had to buy a new truck, I'd just go work for a company and drive one of theirs because with everything that they put on (them) these days they're in the shop more than on the road and I've seen too many people go broke trying to make a living driving these new emission-control trucks," he said. "It's getting to the point where government regulations and emissions standards are making it harder for the lease operator and less desirable to get into the business."

Despite that, Michael "Motor" Rosenau still loves trucking. "There's not to be a day when I don't," he said. "The quality time I spent with my Dad was when we were trucking, not playing hockey or baseball."



## Than Vermilyea: "TV" stars in his own production

Than Vermilyea, 2013 Owner-Operator of the Year, says one secret to his success is not quitting. "If I lose one customer, I just go out and get another," he said. "Never say no. I'm not the cheapest but I'll sure take credit to being the best because you can knock me down but I keep coming back." Vermilyea said his customers know that when they call him, he'll get the job done - but for those occasional times when he can't, his best policy is honesty. "I'll just tell them," he said. "That's what's helped me. I never say no and I don't lie. I think that has a lot to do with it."

His O-O career started in 1999, when he bought a truck from a guy who was having driver troubles and had decided to farm out work. "I was working, but I wanted my own truck and my own business," he said, noting that he quit a \$60,000 a year gig and has never looked back. "I'm very

proud of what I've done," he said.

To build his business, Vermilyea went door knocking. "I kept sticking my nose in places and asking if they had any work," he said, "and



just about every place told me my rates were too high." He justified his rates through exemplary service, though he said it's tougher these days to charge what you think you're worth. "So many companies

don't really care...because in order to sell their product they have to truck it so much cheaper," he said. "Fortunately, a lot of companies still require good service and I'm lucky to have those kind of people on my side."

Vermilyea invested in a new, \$85,000 trailer recently, admitting that some people think he's crazy going into debt at age 59. "A tradesman has to have good tools or he can't do his job," he said, "and I needed a new trailer. You have to have something to get up...every day for, and that's my reason: I have to go to work and pay for my trailer."

If Vermilyea had to do it all over again, though, he wouldn't, and he blames cut rate carriers. "They're working cheaper, running junk equipment right into the ground," he said. "There's a lot of guys out there cutting each other's throat." To combat this trend, "I just say they'll find out the hard way that if they're paying peanuts all they're going to get is monkeys. Some day they're going to have a load stuck at the scale."

Vermilyea said one company quit him over \$50, going with "bottom feeders. I said... there'll be a day when I told you so - and there's been two of them in the last six months when they called me and asked me to come down because they didn't have a truck and they wanted me to help out. I told them I can't; I'm already working for somebody else."

## Harvey McDonald: Hard work and dedication keys to success as an O-O

Harvey McDonald, Truck News' 2012 Owner-Operator of the Year, has spent 50 years driving more than four million professional miles with no accidents - and many honours. But the 71-year-old started humbly, hauling gravel for a while before deciding to buy his first truck in 1974, a repossessed 1970 cabover GMC Astro that provided a more affordable way for him to get into the business than if he'd shelled out for a brand new tractor. Now on his 13th such unit, McDonald credits his success mostly, though not exclusively, to his work ethic.

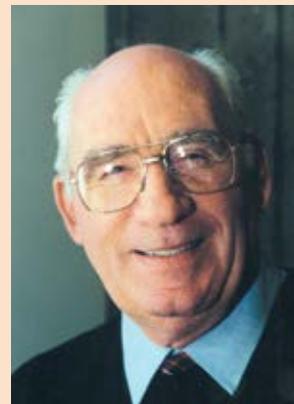
"You work hard at it and it seems to work out after a while," he said. "You have to have in your mind that you're going to work hard, because it's not an easy job and you have to work steady." McDonald noted he's been with TransX for six years, a company that's big enough that he doesn't have to worry about them disappearing on him. He thinks he may keep doing that gig for a couple more years and then perhaps "get out of this racket and retire."

In the meantime, building success as an O-O also means you have to take care of your equipment so it's there when you need it. "I usually keep (it) in pretty good shape," McDonald said, "and usually get rid of them before they have 800,000 kilometres on them. They still

have warranty then." He said that means he's usually ready to trade in his trucks when they're around three and a half years old, which he said "seems to work out all right" because not only is there still plenty of life left in them, but they also give him a healthy down payment on the new one - as well as a reason to go to work every day. "We have truck payments, so you gotta make sure you have enough work to make them," he said, "but it's always worked out good for me. We kept our head above water." As for how much income you need to make a living - measured in the distance you need to put in - he said that running about 3000 miles per week "seems to be a magic number in

this racket. If you get that you should be okay."

The self-deprecating McDonald attributes his half century of driving without an accident to luck, as opposed to actually following a plan. As he told Truck News when



he won his Owner-Operator of the Year award two years ago, "if you're in the wrong place at the wrong time, you've had'er no matter what." You can make your own luck, of course, and McDonald said the keys to avoiding dangerous situations are to not follow too closely, keep other cars at a safe distance and keep to the inside lane in cities if possible "because you can always get on the shoulder." ■

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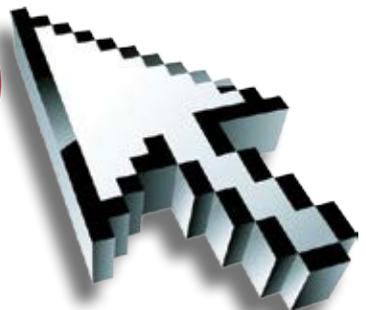
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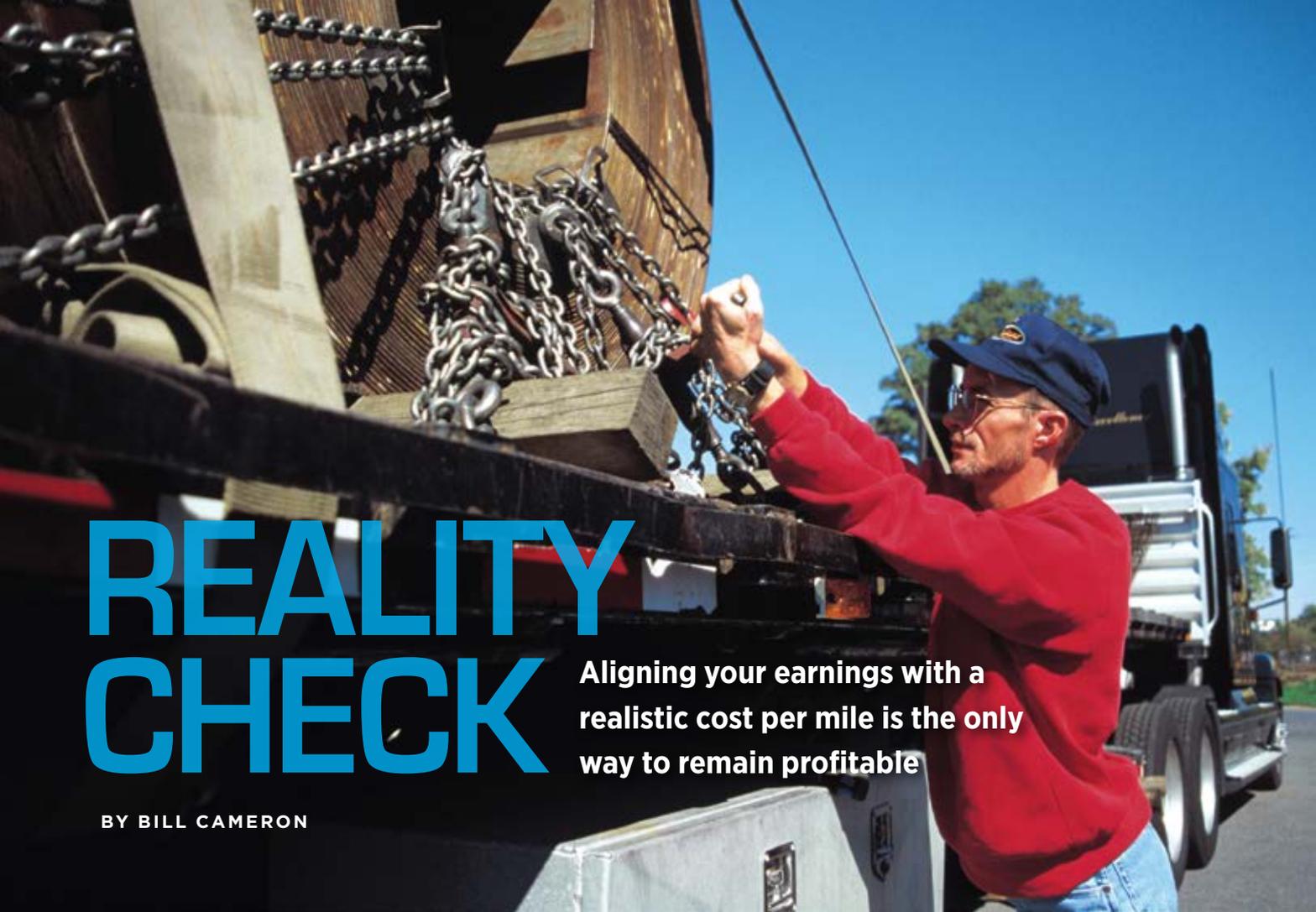
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# REALITY CHECK

Aligning your earnings with a realistic cost per mile is the only way to remain profitable

BY BILL CAMERON

The actual cost of operation of a typical highway tractor seems to be some mystical science. Ask ten people what their cost per mile is, and get ten vastly different answers. Many operators, it seems, calculate their operating cost based on unrealistically low maintenance costs, and advertised attainable fuel mileage, rather than reality, factors which can have wild swings depending on your weight group, area of travel, and if the truck is spec'd properly. These factors must be accounted for.

For the sake of simplification, this article assumes you have the truck properly spec'd, and you are pulling tandem trailers, travelling 120,000 miles per year, which fits the majority of you. Those who pull heavy should obviously realize that fuel, licence costs, and maintenance increase by at least 15%, over the life of a truck. So should the drivers pay. We'll assume you have truck payments of no more than five years duration. We'll also assume the cost of licence and insurance, so this may suit the situation of not only owner-operators, but small fleets as well.

Fuel is, and will always be, your biggest cost. If your truck averages 7.5mpg (imperial), assume 6mpg. Last winter was six months long. Even with anti-idling accessories, thinner fuel burns easier, so don't sell your-

self short. Current pump prices in Southern Ontario are about \$1.23 per litre, or \$1.09 before HST. At 6mpg, this is a cost per mile of \$.83. Some new trucks are notoriously thirsty. A drop of 1 mpg gives you a cost per mile of \$.99. If you burn DEF, add up to another \$.03 per mile. When you review these numbers, it sends the message home that anti-idling equipment, of some form, is not optional; it's a necessity. A typical Class 8 truck engine burns a minimum of one gallon per hour on fast idle. A typical bunk heater burns about that every eight hours. Add the cost of seven extra gallons burnt for every cold night (about \$35 per night) and even without the quieter sleep factor, it shouldn't even be a question. Spec'ing a truck for maximum fuel economy is a very treacherous slope, one easier travelled if we had psychic powers about our future employment. The simplest miscue when assuming your needs could carry an annual cost of several thousand dollars. An overpowered, or underpowered, engine is the most obvious potential loss. Moving between trailer types is also a profit killer. A high rise bunk truck pulling a regular, typically loaded flatbed, will cost you about ¾ mile per gallon over a flat or mid roof. A flattop bunk in front of a van will translate to at least a one mpg drop.

Assume a value of \$.35 per mile covering truck payments, repairs, and maintenance. It's been argued that this is an unrealistically high number, but a typical smaller company or owner-operator has much stricter maintenance schedules than do the big fleets, as well as quite often keeping the truck longer. These items are lumped together for a reason. This number is based on a five year maintenance cycle. If you keep the truck longer, you may have no payments, but your maintenance costs will increase. Assuming a \$2600 monthly truck payment, you've already spent \$.26 per mile. The remaining \$.09 disappears quickly with regular maintenance, scheduled repairs, tires, the pro-rated cost of future larger repairs (which you must save for), infrequent maintenance issues, etc. Soon, legislation will insist that annual inspections involve removal of wheels and brake drums. No more \$200 safeties. Just the usual number of wiper blades, air filters, and headlights alone can add up to \$350 annually.

Licence and insurance are set figures, which is why we assume an annual mileage. Assume \$.11 per mile for licence, insurance, and tolls. If you run strictly Canada, insurance is cheaper, and you have few tolls, but the US East Coast is all tolls, so this is an average.

This leaves us with our second largest expense: you. I've purposely left this for the last, because it's, I feel, the most significant point for an owner-operator. Figures obviously vary, but an approximate average company driver pay is \$.48.

Add all these figures up, and a typical owner-operator has a cost per mile of \$1.80, at current fuel prices. A small fleet needs to add about \$.06 for your payroll source deduction contributions to bring your break even number to \$1.86, assuming drivers attain comparable fuel mileage with the owner-operators.

Arguably, we arrived at these figures with mainte-

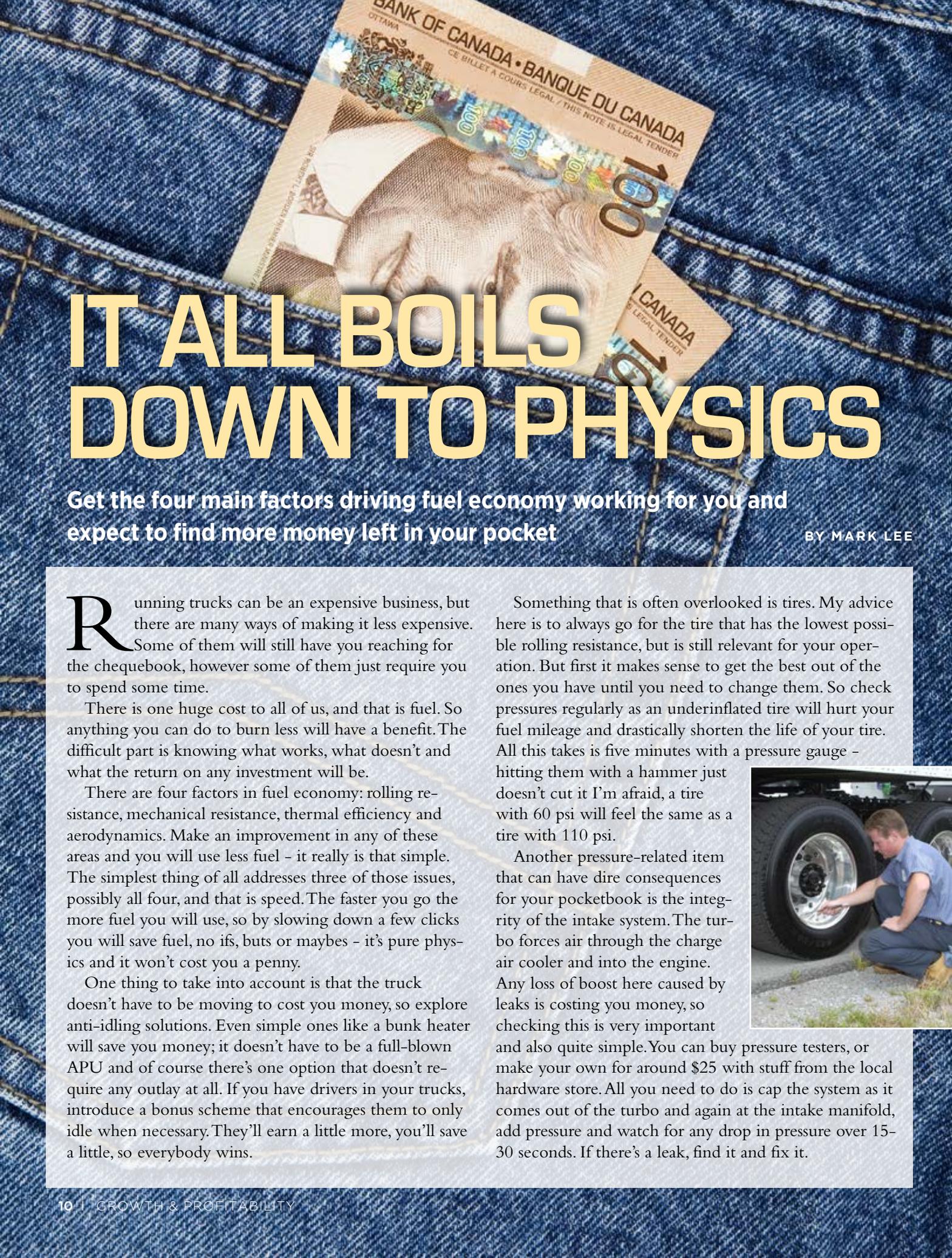
nance/repair costs at the high end of reality. Depending on your equipment, your fuel mileage will vary, either up or down, which is why we used a somewhat pessimistic mileage figure. If your repairs factor in lower over the truck life cycle, enjoy your bonus. Others won't be so lucky.

Compare these figures to those on the recruitment boards at truckstops, and you'll see that almost nobody pays enough to cover these costs. How then, are there any owner-operators and small fleets in existence? First, and most obvious, lower fuel costs. Properly spec'd and maintained equipment, operated by a gentle right foot, makes better fuel mileage possible. Second, a reason used more in recent years than in past decades, is many operators playing a very dangerous dice game with the repairs and maintenance fund. If it works, you'll have a healthier bank balance when you next trade trucks, but heaven help you if the dice roll the other way. Third, and unfortunately most common reason why owner-operators work for less than these target earnings, is their own personal paycheque. An alarming number of owner-operators are taking "what's left" as a paycheque, often considerably less than typical pay levels for drivers. This is, bluntly, very poor business. Assuming the financial risk of ownership, for less personal remuneration than a hired driver with no investment, is foolhardy, but sadly, very common. This could be why we often hear of ex long time owner-operators driving company equipment, and claiming better earnings.

Emission standards, and declining fuel quality aren't going away. Trucks will continue to escalate in price, and your repair shop will charge more to fix them. Costs are unlikely to change, except to increase. Maybe e-mailing this article to your carrier or favourite customers would be a good start to right the financial ship. More closely aligning your earnings and your realistic costs is the only way to remain profitable. Simply hoping for black ink in your annual accountants summary isn't responsible business practice. ■

**KNOW THY OPERATION:** The simplest miscue when assuming your needs could carry an annual cost of several thousand dollars. For example, choosing a tractor with the right roof for the trailer you're pulling has a great impact on fuel savings.





# IT ALL BOILS DOWN TO PHYSICS

Get the four main factors driving fuel economy working for you and expect to find more money left in your pocket

BY MARK LEE

**R**unning trucks can be an expensive business, but there are many ways of making it less expensive. Some of them will still have you reaching for the chequebook, however some of them just require you to spend some time.

There is one huge cost to all of us, and that is fuel. So anything you can do to burn less will have a benefit. The difficult part is knowing what works, what doesn't and what the return on any investment will be.

There are four factors in fuel economy: rolling resistance, mechanical resistance, thermal efficiency and aerodynamics. Make an improvement in any of these areas and you will use less fuel - it really is that simple. The simplest thing of all addresses three of those issues, possibly all four, and that is speed. The faster you go the more fuel you will use, so by slowing down a few clicks you will save fuel, no ifs, buts or maybes - it's pure physics and it won't cost you a penny.

One thing to take into account is that the truck doesn't have to be moving to cost you money, so explore anti-idling solutions. Even simple ones like a bunk heater will save you money; it doesn't have to be a full-blown APU and of course there's one option that doesn't require any outlay at all. If you have drivers in your trucks, introduce a bonus scheme that encourages them to only idle when necessary. They'll earn a little more, you'll save a little, so everybody wins.

Something that is often overlooked is tires. My advice here is to always go for the tire that has the lowest possible rolling resistance, but is still relevant for your operation. But first it makes sense to get the best out of the ones you have until you need to change them. So check pressures regularly as an underinflated tire will hurt your fuel mileage and drastically shorten the life of your tire. All this takes is five minutes with a pressure gauge - hitting them with a hammer just doesn't cut it I'm afraid, a tire with 60 psi will feel the same as a tire with 110 psi.

Another pressure-related item that can have dire consequences for your pocketbook is the integrity of the intake system. The turbo forces air through the charge air cooler and into the engine. Any loss of boost here caused by leaks is costing you money, so checking this is very important and also quite simple. You can buy pressure testers, or make your own for around \$25 with stuff from the local hardware store. All you need to do is cap the system as it comes out of the turbo and again at the intake manifold, add pressure and watch for any drop in pressure over 15-30 seconds. If there's a leak, find it and fix it.



Next up is to ensure your engine is running as it should, and really the only parts that can go out of adjustment are all in the top end. An annual valve set adjustment will ensure that everything stays how it should and will pay dividends in economy, performance and engine brake efficiency.

Another relatively low-cost fix is to get the truck aligned properly. Not only will poor alignment tear up your tires, it will also increase fuel use. The reason tires will wear prematurely or unevenly is essentially because they're being dragged down the road, which obviously takes more effort than simply rolling along. So get everything true and correct and the truck will not only drive better, it will save fuel at the same time.

A thorough check of your truck's air and electrical systems will also bring benefits, especially as any problems in those areas can have dire consequences when it gets cold and cold is not something we're short of up here in Canada.

All of the above procedures are relatively inexpensive, but it doesn't stop there. Sometimes you have to speculate to accumulate, and there are a whole truckload of improvements you can make to your truck that will bring a saving to you long-term. The main thing to be aware of here is the return on investment and the time it takes to get that return.

We've already covered tires, but I cannot emphasize how important rolling resistance is, so I'm bringing it up again. In my opinion it is the number one factor in fuel economy. It doesn't matter which truck you drive, what you haul or where you haul it, you will have rubber between your truck and the road.

Lower rolling resistance tires may be more expensive, they may wear out faster, but they will save you money every time they turn. You don't have to have the lowest of the low, but getting the lowest rolling resistance tire that's suitable for your operation is essential to getting the most from your investment.

Next on the list is mechanical resistance. There is one simple relatively inexpensive way to improve this and that is by switching to fully synthetic lubricants. The lighter film strength of these oils mean that you get less oil churn and the moving parts don't have to work as hard to move the oil around, so more of their energy will be transferred into whatever it is they're designed to do.



**GET STREAMLINED: Roof fairings, cab extenders, side skirts or air scoops forward of the trailer axles will all bring a saving at a relatively low cost.**

Using these in the engine is not a no-brainer as oil change intervals may mean that the increased costs don't outweigh their benefits. Only an oil sampling program will accurately indicate if it will work in your operation, but in transmissions and axles they will - due to the longer drain intervals - bring a saving.

There are also metal treatments on the market that polish and coat the surfaces of the moving parts in your engine, transmission, differentials and wheel bearings. I don't have any direct experience of these processes, but I hear there are savings to be had. It isn't something that should be done just to save money, as it's quite expensive, but if you're replacing parts and you

can have this treatment applied to the parts (the parts are also finely polished) then it is something worth considering. From what I've heard, the payback can be up to 18 months for a full engine rebuild using treated parts to as little as three months for wheel bearings.

Next up is the thermal efficiency of the engine. Basic maintenance as outlined above will go a long way here, but also simple improvements like a high-flow exhaust system from the manifold back will help the engine run more efficiently. However, you need a pre-emission engine for this to work. On the intake side a washable air filter can bring benefits. Not only can it be re-used multiple times, they also allow more air through while at the same time do a good, sometimes better, job of trapping all the dust particles. As with exhaust modifications, if the engine is sucking or blowing less hard, more of the energy produced will be transmitted into turning the wheels.

Aerodynamics rounds things off. Roof fairings, cab extenders, side skirts or air scoops forward of the trailer axles will all bring a saving at a relatively low cost. They're all easy to fit and they work from the moment you install them and will continue to do so for every mile you go down the road.

It all boils down to physics. Anything you can do to make that truck go down the road more easily will require less energy. The fuel tank is where all the truck's energy originates and therefore anything you can do that lessens the need to fill that up as frequently will mean more money in your pocket. You don't even need to spend any money to do any of this either if you spend a little time doing all the free stuff, especially slowing down. Then use the money that alone saves you to make the next improvement on your list. ■



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