



Owner-Operator's Business
Association of Canada

Association professionnelle des
routiers autonomes du Canada

*...from the
director's chair*

Turning the tide of public perception

Public perception of trucking and truckers – frequently negative and often mistaken – is a concern that's always with us. When you're struggling to pay the fuel bill or driving around in circles looking for a place to park, it's not always top-of-mind. Then wham! You learn through the mainstream media that trucks are responsible for all the death and destruction on our highways, and global warming to boot.

And, so the story goes, you – the driver – are part of an unskilled and unwashed pack of hooligans who is driving truck because you're unemployable elsewhere.

While it's individual drivers who take the hit at the personal level, public image is a concern for the industry as a whole. The perception of driving as an unskilled trade is a huge barrier in attracting career-minded people into the industry. So, in a business environment where there's stiff competition for workers from a shrinking labour pool, trucking, like many industries, is looking at a makeover as one strategy for survival.

In the US, for example, the industry-wide "Good Stuff. Trucks Bring It" image campaign presents the public with a positive, modern image of the industry and emphasizes the relevance of trucking to their lives. In Canada, the Canadian Trucking Human Resources Council has engaged industry stakeholders in a concerted effort to reposition the industry, enhancing the profession's image and promoting recognition of driving as a skilled trade.

The industry is investing in top-down strategies to combat negative stereotypes, but at the grassroots level, where the rubber hits the road, I can't think of two initiatives that foster more goodwill and understanding and help bridge the divide between trucking and the public than Trucker Buddy and the World's Largest Truck Convoy.

Trucker Buddy, a pen-pal program that matches truck drivers with elementary school children in grades two to eight, boasts close to 4,000 drivers communicating with more than 100,000 students around the world. Trucker Buddies send postcards, notes, letters, e-mails, and photos to the children in their assigned class each week; the kids track the driver's travel on maps in the classroom and write individual letters to their Trucker Buddy each month.

The benefits of improved skills in reading, writing, geography, mathematics, and history are obvious, and it's learning in a fun and stimulating way. But Trucker Buddies also teach important road safety lessons – like sharing the road – and send positive messages to their kids as well: don't do drugs, study hard, stay in school.

Since its inception in 1993, Trucker Buddy has helped educate over a million school children and introduce them to the world of trucking. And every one of those million kids has a family – parents, siblings, or other relatives – whose lives are touched in a meaningful way by truckers. How many "Good Stuff" stickers is that worth?

It's hard to describe the potpourri of feelings – pride, satisfaction, and just pure joy – that overwhelm one when a Special Olympics convoy comes rolling over the finish line.

The World's Largest Truck Convoy for Special Olympics brings truckers, cops, and athletes together for a very special cause: a one-day celebration every September to raise awareness – and money – for Special Olympics.

The Convoy, a spin-off from the Law Enforcement Torch Run, was the brainchild of Cpl. Norm Schneiderhan, of the Orange County Sheriff's Department in Florida, who created the Convoy as a way to get his friends in trucking



**Joanne
Ritchie:
OBAC
executive
director**

involved in a fundraising effort.

Since the initial convoy in Florida in 2000, the idea has spread to more than 40 jurisdictions in the US and Canada. Last year, nearly 400 drivers participated in five events staged across Canada, and hundreds more took a day out of their schedules south of the border to participate. Their efforts raised a whopping US\$698,000, and the best thing about the money? All the money raised locally stays in the community to benefit that community's Special Olympics programs.

The impact that participating drivers have on the athletes is obvious – the smiles and the cheers are not soon forgotten – and when you see truckers hugging cops, and tears flowing freely all around, you know there's something happening inside.

But it's not just the athletes and the cops who come away from a Convoy with a greater appreciation for truckers. Hundreds of community volunteers work throughout the year to plan and stage each event; that's hundreds of people who experience first-hand the generosity and compassion truckers.

We celebrate Trucker Buddy and the Convoy because they are unique and effective approaches to teaching, mentoring, role-modeling, and fundraising, but their value as image-builders and stereotype busters can't be overlooked. Perhaps it's time to broaden the top-down strategy for changing public opinion to include tools that work. □