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A Visit with LTL Carriers

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Nurserymen grow the plants, sell the plants and have them shipped. Carriers pick-up the plants and deliver them to the customers. Sounds simple, right? Well there is a lot more than simplicity involved in the interdependent relationship between growers and carriers. This article explains the position of LTL transportation in the foliage industry and gives a general outline of LTL operations.

Shipping your plants with an LTL carrier may not make you think twice. After all, you've been using them for years and your plants arrived at your customer's location. The four LTL (less than load) carriers that service the foliage industry are Ball Motor Line, Inc., Lester Coggins Trucking, Inc., Transport Brokerage, Inc., and Tropical Plant Carriers. These four trucking companies are responsible for picking-up the plant load at your nursery and maybe 15 other nurseries in the same day, and transporting the plant material back to their warehouses where they consolidate and stage the orders for out of state shipments. The plants are then reloaded onto the trailers, driven out of Florida and delivered to customers. You really depend on their service. They really depend on your business.

Preston Ball moves plants from warehouse staging area to loading dock at Ball Motor Line, Inc.



Warehouse where plants are stored before they are shipped to customers.

Placing Your Order

The trucking companies' number one tool besides their trucks is the telephone. You call in your order and the information immediately is recorded. A Freight Guide lists the orders by breaking-down the information into: customer name, city and state, number of cubes, the cost, and the total number of packages to be picked-up. Computers enable the trucking companies to maintain accurate records of orders placed. Routing can be worked out on the computers as well as projecting estimated miles to be driven and the organization of staging the plant loads while in the warehouse. Staging involves the organization and placement of the plants in the warehouse in the



exact order in which they will be reloaded onto the trailer. If the final delivery is in Rochester, New York, that order is loaded first. If the first order is to be delivered in Atlanta, Georgia, that order will be loaded last. Efficiently filling a 48 foot reefer that has an average of 2,400 cubic feet of loading space is a challenge met hundreds of times a week by the trucking companies. Their efficiency saves money for everyone.



Photos by E. Shaunn Alderman

Carl Heussener, in-bound dispatcher at Lester Coggins Trucking, Inc. uses computer to locate available trucks.

Special Equipment

The needs of the foliage industry require the carriers to purchase special equipment in order to transport the plants in a safe way. The carriers purchase thousands of dollars worth of plywood and other lumber products to protect the plants from damage during travel time. Many growers do not box their plants; therefore, there is more possibility of damage to them in route. The carriers want to lessen the plant damage claims and have tried for years to get the growers to better package their material. Since many of the growers haven't adhered to this request, the carriers have taken it upon themselves to spend the money to protect the growers' product. Decking, a type of shelving system inside the reefer, was developed from the need of protecting the plants from damage and as a more efficient way of loading them. Plywood sheets rest on pull-out "shelves" that are about two inches wide. When the truck comes back to

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SPECIAL REPORT

Photos by E. Shaun Alderman



An example of decking - a method carriers use to protect their foliage shipments.

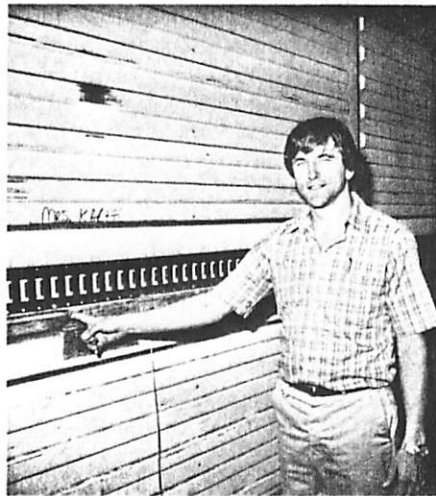
Florida carrying hard freight or a commodity other than foliage, the plywood used as shelves and the lumber used for bracing is stored underneath the trailer in the belly box.

The trucking companies must stay up-to-date in their knowledge about innovations that will help them carry and deliver the plants without the occurrence of damage. Many customers request that the carriers use thermographic recording instruments. During winter months these instruments are used in every trailer that leaves the state. The instruments record on paper the temperatures that the plants are exposed to during shipment. These recorders cost approximately \$23 each. Another important addition to the trailers during winter months is the installation of strip doors. These polyurethane strips, also known as winter curtains, serve as a "second door" to the load and help protect the plants from exposure to the cold weather.

The Real Way to Package Plants

It is a dream shared by the carriers that some day, all nurserymen will spend as much time and care packaging their plants as they do growing them. It is a proven fact that loose plants do not always arrive as safely as

boxed plants. With reluctance, most carriers accept loose plants, but they prefer to transport boxed material. Even with sleeved material there is room for damage because cold weather can freeze a plant that is not double sleeved with the top stapled shut. Carriers also have a problem when growers use poor quality boxes. Some plants start out with a small survival chance because the grower used an inferior



Robert Roche, plant manager at TPC points out double deck track used in the reefers.

package. The boxes encounter moisture regularly whether from within the box from the transpiration of the plants or outside, where rain may wet the boxes during loading. Proper packaging is essential if growers expect their material to arrive safely.

Bills of Lading and Correct Labeling

The number one request of carriers to shippers concerning the Bill of Lading is that the bill is filled out completely. This may sound basic but it is surprising to hear the truckers describe this on the top of their complaint list. In filling out a bill of lading one should first write the correct date that reflects the day the plants are packed for shipment and picked up by the carrier. The next step is to indicate whether the order is to be prepaid or collect. Prepaid means that the trucking company is to look to the party in the shipper area for the payment of freight charges-whether it is the grow-

er or a broker. Collect means that the consignee is responsible for the freight charges. Under "Consignee" the shipper must list the company name of the customer, the accurate physical address of the delivery point, and most forgotten but very important, the customer's telephone number. Carriers stress the importance of filling out all the necessary information about the number of packages, their length, width and height, number of cubes (usually figured by the carrier), and commodity description. Any special shipping instructions should be listed in the commodity description column. The rate and amount columns will be used only by the carrier.

When you mail a letter to your cousin in Kansas City, you are required by the U.S. Postal Service regulations to write more information on the envelope than "My Cousin, Kansas City." If you ship a load of plants to Kansas City, the trucking company wants you to put complete labels on all of the material being shipped. Your order may consist of 100 cubes out of a possible 3,400 cubes. Carriers requesting that shippers label the material being shipped isn't asking too much. In fact, carriers will continue to encourage shippers to accurately label all plant material to lessen the opportunity of misplacement.

One idea utilized by an LTL carrier is to establish a standard code system. The trucking company has assigned a code number for every grower and customer they service. Acme Wholesalers in Chicago (fictitious name) might be assigned ACM02 as their code number. If shippers and carriers would use the same list of code numbers, more accurate deliveries would become commonplace. The trucking company using this system reports that coding has really helped make a difference in the customer service they provide.

How Carriers Decide Their Rates

Although many people may feel there is something mysterious about the way trucking companies establish their rates, the process is elementary. An easy way to see how the rates are

set is to look at one dollar and break down the operation to see what it costs the trucking company to earn that dollar. A few of the cost variables considered are overhead, payroll and insurance. Carriers must pay a lot of money for their equipment, and like growers, they experience the same slack season. For six months they run their equipment on a tight schedule and the other six months they squirm to stay busy. This roller coaster schedule costs money. Most growers understand that trucking rates can be seasonal. Also figured into their rates is the amount of money spent on special equipment needed to ship perishable, live plants.

Claims

The Common Nightmare

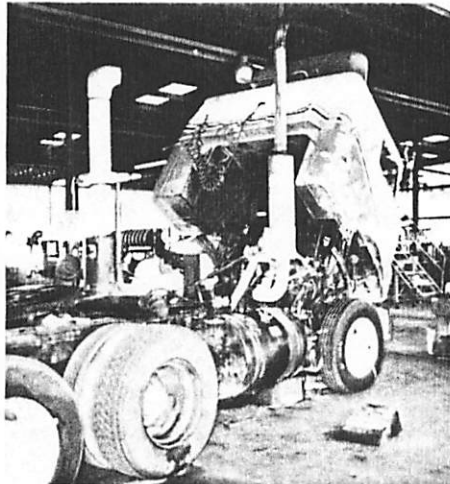
Claims. The very word may cause your palms to sweat and your heart to race. This nightmare is expressed as the number one problem commonly experienced by shippers and carriers. Since there is so much anxiety, financial loss, and sheer frustration and aggravation associated with claims, some people may ask why the foliage and trucking industries don't combine their efforts and establish practical guidelines and demand cooperation among the shippers and carriers.

The investigation of claims is handled differently at each trucking company. One efficient method is for the claims investigation team to meet regularly and openly discuss every individual situation. One person in the team is responsible for gathering the initial data and checking the claims history of the customer in question. This method is thorough and provides the carrier with the opportunity to establish a check and balance system of their customers and drivers.

Safety Practices

Preventative maintenance work is performed by skilled mechanics on every truck when it returns from running a load. This common procedure is practiced by all four LTL carriers. The trucking companies expressed their strong beliefs in taking good care of the expensive equipment. Good safety measures protect everyone. To pro-

mote safe driving records, the trucking companies offer profitable incentive programs to the drivers. Although the hiring process may vary between carriers, drivers applying for work are screened and tested. The screening and testing procedure may include correctly filling out a log sheet and figuring a route by using a road map. The applicant may be required to have two previous years of verifiable, over the road work experience and is always required to have a Florida Chauffeur's license. After taking physical examinations, the drivers are road tested. Orientation covers company rules and regu-



Mechanic Charles Lick of TPC inspects the trucks after every run.

lations as well as explaining the correct procedure of preparing paper work. If accepted, the driver may be placed with a driver-trainer for one month as a second seat driver. With some trucking companies the new driver may become eligible to drive first seat for anywhere from one to six months. Safety is an important focus for trucking companies and the industries they serve.

Common Goal

Shippers and carriers share a common goal to have better arrivals. This means on-time delivery and claim-free shipments. There are many ways the shippers and carriers can work together to better serve the customers. When asked how the shippers could help the truckers do a better job, the following suggestions were provided: 1) Have a noticeable outdoor sign that

indicates the location of your nursery. Make sure your nursery is listed in the *Florida Foliage Locator*. Truckers say they often depend on the popular directory to help them find the nurseries. 2) On the day of pick-up, have the orders ready on time. When the drivers have to wait for nursery people to finish packing the orders, their schedules are backed up and on-time deliveries become nearly impossible. 3) Truckers are skilled professionals but in tight situations, certain obstacles might be in the way. Provide an accessible pick-up area for the truckers. 4) When filling out a bill of lading, complete ALL parts, including the customer's correct telephone number. 5) Label all plants. Carriers are used to seeing scribble marks on the plant sleeves but this information is difficult to read and smears easily when it's wet. 6) Better packaging of the plants is desired by all carriers. They want the shippers to spend the extra nickels for quality boxes. This would help to alleviate the opportunity for plant damage during shipping. 7) Shippers should package for the season. During winter months, the carriers request that the shippers at least double sleeve the plants if they do not plan to box the material. 8) Shippers could try to educate their customers about calling in orders with enough time for growers to place the orders with the carriers before the cut-off time. No one wants to turn an order down, but it's costly for the trucking companies to rearrange schedules and have their employees stay to handle late orders. Shippers could also try to educate their customers about the importance of providing an accessible point of delivery. There are many horror stories about truckers being able to back the trailers only as close as 200 feet from the building because of icy conditions. This means that the plants were carried for 200 feet in 20 degree weather.

The interdependent relationship of the shippers and carriers is not without room for improvement. Instead of pointing fingers of blame, industry members are learning the need and importance of combining their efforts to successfully carry out the services of supplying and delivering.