

This article was written for Autocar, a custom vocational truck manufacturer. They are a personal client.

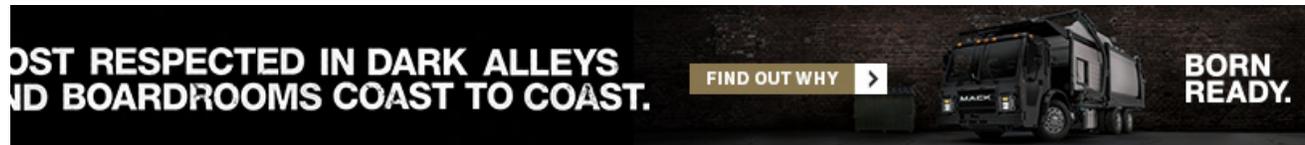
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Are You Figuring the HCO When Purchasing a Truck?

February 1, 2017



Keeping your vocational truck up and running is more important than ever before. Downtime is probably the most important HCO of all, and luckily, one you can minimize if you plan ahead.

By Steve Maurer

Are you buying a new truck for your waste collection fleet? This is a major purchase and one that must be carefully thought out. Most buyers carefully consider the cost of acquisition. I am sure you have all the bases covered.

Acquisition cost obviously involves everything included that adds to the bottom line of the purchase order. Everything from tires to taxes is included. It is the one, final number you look at before, with trembling hands, you sign the dotted line.

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But, savvy buyers like you are looking at more than the acquisition cost. You look at the TCO, or Total Cost of Ownership, as well. After all, buying a vocational truck is a long-term commitment. You want to get as many years out of the rig as possible. Also, with as small an overall maintenance budget as you can.

Of course, TCO also involves operational costs, which includes the price of fuel, scheduled maintenance, normal wear and tear repairs, and similar items. And I'm going to talk about a few of them in this article.

But, sometimes truck buyers forget what I call HCOs. These are metrics you cannot forget to include in the budget, even though it can be hard to put exact numbers on them. Some of the items are rarely considered at all by many vocational truck buyers.

What Are HCOs, Anyway?

HCOs are Hidden Costs of Operation. Not too many people call them that, in fact, I may be the only one. According to Jim Johnston of Autocar Trucks, these indirect cost factors are vitally important, "Customers know the benefits of custom trucks shows up in their profit and loss. When you build a truck that fits your operation you're going to be better off for years to come." Many of the HCOs pertain to the health, safety and comfort of the driver/operator. Still others are important to the community the refuse and recycling company services.

Certainly, there are differences between choosing a stock truck out of dealer inventory that probably has to be modified for your chosen body, versus a chassis that has been custom-engineered and purpose-built for you. The HCO of that custom-engineered truck is very likely going to be quite a bit lower over the years you operate that vehicle. Let us start with driver considerations.

A True Office on Wheels

Today was trash and recycling pickup in our neighborhood. Even though they hit our neighborhood fairly early, I was already in my office working. Here I am, sitting in my office with all the necessary "tools of the trade" surrounding me, along with personal items to make the morning comfortable and more productive.



But hearing the first truck roll to a stop, I popped outside to talk to my trash truck driver. As he drove off, I headed back to my office. Just like me, the refuse truck operator was in his "office" as well. And he will probably be in the office way longer than I am in mine.

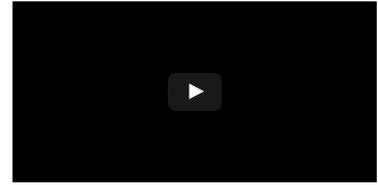
Cab design is an important consideration. For one, it should be roomy enough for every driver, even the bigger ones, to make it through a long day without being fatigued—that is a safety issue. Then there is the driver's personal gear and the tools necessary for his operation. Consider: my office is a cozy 10x9 foot room. It is small enough to keep everything I need easily accessible; yet, large enough to keep supplies out of the way when they are not needed.

The driver should be given the same consideration. Often, they carry a bundle or backpack for transferring between trucks. Productivity will suffer if there is not enough room for the driver to fit what they need and not feel cramped.

Which brings up another HCO. During the course of a day, your driver enters and exits the cab hundreds of times. Attention should be given to the safe and ergonomic ingress and egress of the vehicle's operator. Most standard trucks come with, of course, standard doors and steps. They have to because a stock truck has not been spec'd for a particular task.



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But a custom-engineered vocational truck is built with a specific purpose. Therefore, the style of doors, height of entry, and style of steps can be specified and built to increase safety and ergonomics based on your operation. Your drivers are not one size, but make sure the door to their "office" fits them all.

While we are on the subject of driver size, what happens once they are inside? Obviously, an adjustable seat is a given. But, have you specified a steering wheel that both tilts and telescopes? Drivers do not need a wheel that is rubbing their belly because it is too close. And they do not want to lean and reach either. An adjustable steering wheel lets them personalize their driving experience.

Here is another thing. With a quick glance around my office, I can monitor printer operation, Internet connection and computer status, all without leaving my chair. On-board diagnostics should be readily available and provide warnings—in plain language, not secret code—to the truck operator so he can communicate with your technicians at the depot if necessary. Make sure that the trucks you chose have that feature.

Many refuse truck drivers are stationed on the curbside of the vehicle. That means adding right-hand controls to that side, in addition to the standard steering wheel, gas pedal and brakes. So, it makes sense that the diagnostics are also on the curbside where the operator spends the most time. Unless the rig is custom-engineered, that means more modifications. And modifications mean the likelihood of reliability problems down the road. Speaking of modifications ...

Advantages of Buying a Custom-Engineered Refuse Truck

I have been an industrial maintenance tech and electrician for more than 30 years now. And, if there's one thing I can attest to, it is that modification is never as good as doing it right the first time.

Over the years, I have had many devices and systems brought to me for modification. To make it work, I have needed to cut into and splice together electrical, hydraulic and pneumatic components and systems. I have been around enough to know that when a system goes down, those are the first places to troubleshoot.

It is the same with trucks. One that must be modified to fit the job is never as good as one that was designed and built specifically for the task. Every time you cut into a chassis, modify a wiring harness or add material for mounting bolts, you get a problem just waiting to rear its ugly head.

Instead of buying a stock truck and modifying it to fit your refuse body, select a chassis OEM that will custom-engineer the chassis to fully integrate your chosen body. Even if it costs a little more at acquisition, the long-term savings will increase your bottom line.

Do Not Forget the Community ... Your Paying Customers

After all, it is your customers that pay your expenses for the most part. Therefore, it is important to consider them as well. And what to consider may surprise you. Face it—navigating around city and urban streets can be a royal pain. Snaking around parked cars, tight corners, cul-de-sacs and avoiding obstacles is stressful. So, when selecting your truck chassis, be sure to compare your options carefully. Cabovers provide better visibility than conventionals, but cabovers are not all the same. Some have larger front windshields, curved rear corner windows to increase visibility when backing up and after-treatment systems set up to maximize visibility out the rear window. Be sure to also compare turning radius to eliminate backing events, which dramatically increase the risk of collisions, or worse.

Even a small gash in a parked car can put a huge dent in your cash flow. Protect your customers' property by ensuring your drivers have adequate visibility in any situation. And make sure that even the tightest turns are handled smoothly, without backing and filling.

Case Study: Maximizing Uptime

Obviously, a refuse truck designed, engineered and built right the first time helps maximize your uptime. But what else can you do? Hank Brown, the Director of Fleet Operations for TFC Recycling, based in Virginia, has more than 25 years of experience. TFC's fleet of over 150 trucks has a mix of suppliers and Hank notices some are better at helping maximize uptime than others. Hank said, "Autocar has a top-notch service after the sale program. Their Autocar Solutions service means our mechanics can always contact them—and most problems are solved over the phone or through e-mail. They always have the schematics and diagnostic information on hand."



TFC Recycling enlisted Autocar to custom-engineer trucks specifically for their operation. Photo courtesy of Autocar.

A Final Consideration—Uptime



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Everything breaks, no matter how well designed and built. It is just the way things are. So, the goal is to minimize downtime and increase uptime. After all, a truck stranded on the side of the street is a huge expense. Sending a technician, a tow and a spare truck (if you even have one) costs money and then there will be the disappointed customers to handle.

With an ever-growing population in cities and town, refuse and recycling routes are expanding at a breakneck pace. Keeping your vocational truck up and running is more important than ever before. Downtime is probably the most important HCO of all, and luckily, one you can minimize if you plan ahead.

Steve Maurer, IME, is a business writer with more than 30 years of experience in the industrial maintenance, electrical and safety sectors.

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