

# Effective Driver Training Programs: Your Ticket to Cost Savings & Effective Risk Management

**By Carmen Daecher, CHCM**

Everyone agrees that motorcoach and transit driver training is essential. Motorcoach owners, transit organizations, insurance companies, governments—everyone agrees that training is important. But what kind of training should be done and when?

Most insurance companies are not definitive in detailing the training they believe is necessary. While they prepare videos and other training materials, they worry about their own risk if they leave something out from what they may define as a standard.

Motorcoach and transit operators have strong feelings about training. However, they vary widely, and they are tempered by the pressures of preparing a new driver and maintaining tenured drivers for service. After all, if the wheels are not turning, who cares about training?

I have had the good fortune of being part of the development of numerous driver curricula, then presenting the programs to drivers and driver trainers. I have developed many training presentations, and I have worked with different organizations to understand the relationship between training and accident reduction. I have seen the results of improper (or no) training through accident reconstruction and investigations throughout my career.

Some may question the need for training programs or even the need for training at all. More fundamental than the need for training is to answer the questions, “What type of training?” and “What will be the training objectives?” If these questions can be answered, then it sets the stage for understanding the elements of training and how it should be provided.

## **The Professional Driver**

First, it must be acknowledged that a motorcoach or transit driver is much more than simply a driver. S/he is not only the operator of a bus, but also a public relations person, a marketing person and a customer service representative.

Being “professional” is much more than simply driving well. Therefore, any training program must encompass the knowledge and skills required to perform all of the various associated driving duties.

Aside from content, the intent or objectives for training should also be clear to develop a comprehensive and effective training program. Basically, the objective of any training is to effectively provide and assist in the retention of necessary knowledge and skills associated with duties to be performed.

This includes all regulatory information as well as critical job performance information that is not regulatory in nature. “Skills” are not just related to turning the wheel. They include communication techniques, special-needs passenger assistance and other responsibilities.

To provide effective training geared toward maximum retention relates to technique as much as to content. The style and delivery of the instructor, AV assistance, live demonstrations and hands-on practice are key elements in achieving successful training. Keeping as many of the human senses involved in the training experience as possible is fundamental to the retention of information provided during training.

A combination of classroom and “in the field” activities are necessary to produce the type of learning experience that will result in maximum retention. In the classroom, the use of overheads, slides and videos can assist in effective training. Interactive CD-ROMS or web-based training are also effective, and they can be structured for one-on-one training or for classroom-style training.

Demonstrations and practice on actual equipment is the “in the field” experience. Parking lot and on-the-road demonstrations and practice are essential parts of effective training. Driving simulators are also excellent and efficient for substituting or supporting some of this practice.

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The trainer/facilitator is also very important in achieving training objectives. A lively communication style and a thorough grasp of the content delivered to students are fundamentally important. If the trainer is boring, the whole experience becomes so. Lastly, the environment of the classroom and the hands-on locations must be conducive to allow students to remain attentive. Climate, lighting and seating arrangements are all important as well.

The training program must be tailored



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to the particular needs of the motorcoach or transit operator. For new candidates, a comprehensive training program is necessary. New hires with experience should undergo a thorough evaluation/testing program to ensure that knowledge and skills meet industry standards and company requirements.

Continuing learning programs based upon the collective experience of operators in the company and individual training based upon correctable behaviors should be established.

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For those operators with experience, other than training related to specific organization policies and procedures, a combination of road testing, hands-on testing and role playing should be employed. A road test of 30 to 40 miles (not the 10 to 15 miles used by many) should be used to ensure that defensive driving techniques are adequate and acceptable. Transit operators should take 40 to 45 min. to road-test prospective experienced drivers. The operator's demonstration of adequate use and operation of lifts, tie downs and other such

equipment should be part of the orientation process. Role-playing to test the experienced operator's skill in communication should also be employed.

Based on these tests specific training needs can be identified. Too often, once drivers are hired and trained, they are forgotten. Ongoing training is often considered as unimportant; however, it should be a continuing process. Safety meetings can be an effective way to provide continuing training to operators. This will require that at least a portion of those meetings are focused for training.

At least once a year, a thorough review of any regulatory changes should be provided to your operators. Also, it would be beneficial to know the most frequent type of accidents that occur in the industry and to present case studies of industry

accidents, their causes and how these might be avoided. In such a scenario, operators will become an interactive part of the solutions. This process, in essence, is training since it will remind all drivers of appropriate behaviors and skills.

These are the opportunity areas around which to build training programs for your drivers. The subject matter will dictate the length of training, although no more than one day should be needed. And a combination of classroom and hands-on training should be provided.

Through this understanding, better defensive driving techniques can be developed. As part of a safety meeting, hands-on demonstrations specifically related to those operating issues might be considered.

If an individual operator, whether

because of passenger complaints, moving violations or accidents, exhibits behavior that needs attention, that driver should receive specific training. This is where CD-ROMs or web-based training and the use of an effective driving simulator might be useful. However, one-on-one training that emphasizes proper procedures, techniques and skills is most essential. The operator should also be thoroughly tested.

Sophisticated driving simulators are now making their appearance in the transit and motorcoach industries. An effective driving simulator enhances the entire training effort and, in fact, bridges the gap between classroom instruction and hands-on driving experience. A standardized training program will go a long way in deriving maximum advantage from driver simulation technologies.

## Conclusion

So is all of this training worth it? If a motorcoach company or transit organization uses the suggestions outlined, it will have well-prepared operators and will reduce its accident frequency.

A recent American Society for Training and Development (ASTD) study concludes that investment through training results in higher total shareholder return. For every \$680 spent on training employees, an average 6% improvement in total shareholder return was realized the following year.

When ranked according to how much they spent on training, companies at the top half of the group realized an average 36.9% increase in total shareholder return the next year, while those in the bottom half realized only a 19.8% return. ASTD data indicate that typical and direct training costs amount to 2% of payroll, while indirect and opportunity costs may increase revenues by 10% or more.

Training is not something that should be done simply because it is required or because other people do it. It should be done with the intent of preparing your employees to perform in ways that will reduce your costs and increase your revenue streams. Ultimately, training will benefit everyone in the company—not just those who receive it. ■

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