



Driver error is the bigger safety issue

By: Norman Littler

EDITOR'S NOTE: *Over the summer, Norman Littler, vice president, regulatory and legislative affairs, American Bus Association (ABA), spoke to the International Association of Chiefs of Police Highway Safety Committee and to the New England Motorcoach Association on behalf of the Bus Industry Safety Council (BISC), addressing issues of driver-related accidents and the need for improved enforcement with regard to driver causation.*

In most states that conduct commercial vehicle inspections, the primary focus is on the vehicles themselves, which, in truth, represent only five percent of the problem.

The question is, why are we spending so much money and devoting what I see as too much attention on such a small part of the problem when the bigger issue clearly lies with the driver?

The Bus Industry Safety Council (BISC) is appealing to all safety and enforcement organizations to help us prevent serious bus accidents.

A few sundry industry facts related to this discussion

- The US Commercial Bus Industry carries more passengers annually than US domestic airlines and Amtrak combined.
- Catastrophic bus and motorcoach crashes are still relatively rare events; however, passenger and driver fatalities have been on the increase over the past 10 years.
- Prior to 1999, bus crashes where passengers or drivers were killed remained relatively steady at 6 – 10 fatalities per year over a thirty-year timeline.
- In 1999 the numbers started to increase to the point where we are now experiencing on average 25 passengers or drivers killed per year.
- Unfortunately, these numbers appear to be trending upward.
- The bus industry believes even one fatality per year is too many; and we further believe that, like the domestic airline industry, a fatality-free year is achievable.

Variations on a theme of inattentive driving

While the following video clips have made the rounds on the Internet in one context or another, observed more critically, they do well to document the consequences of catastrophic bus crashes, and illustrate perfectly the types of events BISC is trying to prevent.

Their point in this presentation is to reinforce the fact that the drivers in all these events could have prevented the ensuing consequences when drivers fail to exercise safe driving habits.

WATCH VIDEO CLIPS:

- <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DDTLo-nDsUQ>

Though filmed in Turkey, this is the first instance of a rollover coach accident caught on video, and serves as a perfect example. With the prevalence of cameras and cell phones, we will undoubtedly be seeing more accidents captured by onlookers.

The question here is which driver is at fault? Both are in error and here is why. The driver of the passenger car fails to consider the distance and speed of the oncoming motorcoach, and turns into its path without sufficient time or space to do so.

One might think the taxi triggered the chain of events, but the coach driver was on a steep downgrade and was traveling too fast for the wet road conditions, and also failed to anticipate that the passenger car might pull out into the path of travel. Anyone who practices defensive driving will be aware of such a possibility and try to be ready for the unexpected.

- http://www.liveleak.com/view?i=f5e_1244212107

Again, another incident caught on video that shows what occurs with bad driving habits in play behind the wheel of a commercial vehicle.

Here the lead motorcoach was following the passenger car much too closely, and had no time to react, brake and get stopped or at least avoid the vehicle as it slowed to enter the turn.

The collision pushed both the car and the front of the bus into the path of the approaching concrete mixer.

Similarly, the second motorcoach was following the lead coach at much less than safe distance apart, and with more luck that anything only barely avoided a second collision with the struck vehicles.

- <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1M74j8LvX6k>

The problem here is self-evident. The driver was obviously distracted by the use of his text messaging device.

While the driver was aware of the video event recorder that could capture his every action, he still engaged in an extremely unsafe and prohibited activity.

Vehicle mounted event recorders are growing in popularity with carriers, insurers and regulatory agencies as a means of tracking driver behavior, and as a post-incident investigative tool.

And in spite of this, drivers are still engaging in dangerous activities while behind the wheel.

A report from the University of Michigan Transportation Research Institute makes a comparison between school, transit, scheduled intercity and charter bus driver violation patterns. The research was unable to draw conclusions on scheduled intercity bus drivers due to the small sampling size; however, statistically significant findings on charter bus driver prior violations are meaningful.

TABLE 4: Percentage of Selected Driver Errors by Carrier Type BIFA 1999-2005

DRIVER ERROR	SCHOOL	TRANSIT	INTERCITY	CHARTER	OTHER	UNKNOWN	AVG/TOTAL
Failure to yield	11.6	11.2	4.8	7.0	9.6	8.1	10.3
Inattentive	5.1	4.4	6.0	6.3	6.8	6.8	5.3
Driving too fast	2.1	1.4	12.0	8.2	6.8	10.8	3.7
Not in lane	2.7	1.1	2.4	3.5	7.2	2.7	2.8
Ran off road	2.0	0.8	7.2	3.5	5.2	4.1	2.4
Failure to obey	2.7	1.2	0.0	3.9	2.8	2.7	2.3
Erratic/reckless	1.1	1.1	0.0	3.5	3.6	4.1	1.7
Drowsy/asleep	0.1	0.1	4.8	2.7	3.6	2.7	1.1
Other improper turn	0.5	1.4	0.0	0.0	2.8	0.0	0.9
Over correcting	0.4	0	2.4	0.4	4.4	1.4	0.8
Stopping in road	0.4	0.5	1.2	0.8	0.8	2.7	0.6
N=	857	731	83	256	251	74	2,252

Scheduled intercity bus drivers also had driving records with higher proportions of violations and of either a violation or a crash, but the sample size for intercity drivers is not large enough to attain statistical significance. However charter tour coach drivers had higher proportions on each measure except for DWI, and the differences were statistically significant at the 0.05 level for suspensions, speeding, other moving violations, and any violation or accident. The proportions of charter coach drivers with speeding violations or other moving violations within the last three years were each around twice that of school bus drivers. Almost 45 percent of charter coach drivers had either a traffic violation or crash within the last three years, compared with about 30 percent of school bus drivers.

More than any other factor, driver error is causing motorcoaches to crash. The BISC is appealing for more active, more serious enforcement of moving violations to slow the frequency of commercial vehicle crashes, such as the use of cell phones and texting.

Any trooper in a cruiser can spot this behavior. They see it everyday, but in our estimation they are not taking it as seriously as they should. There needs to be a shift in focus from the vehicle to driver behavior. The poor driver is the weak link; the point of vulnerability, and every trip is a roll of the dice.

Of course, we are betting the vast majority of coach operators have gone to great lengths to hire the right people for the job, and that as professionals will operate their vehicles in the safest fashion possible. But we know that this is not always the case. Companies and drivers can build in bad habits.

Based on recent findings from Federal Motor Carrier Safety Administration "Large Truck Crash Causation Study", the American Transportation Research Institute (ATRI) conducted further investigation into crash prediction based on driver behavior.

Predicting Truck Crash Involvement: Developing a Commercial Driver Behavior-Based Model and Recommended Countermeasures.

In a summary of crash likelihood for all data analyzed, the crash likelihood increases if a driver had:

A Reckless Driving violation - 325%
An Improper Turn violation - 105%
An Improper or Erratic Lane Change conviction - 100%
A Failure to Yield Right of Way conviction - 97%
An Improper Turn conviction - 94%
A Failure to Maintain Proper Lane conviction - 91%
A Past Crash - 87%
An Improper Lane Change violation - 78%
A Failure to Yield Right of Way violation - 70%
A Driving Too Fast for Conditions conviction - 62%

The results presented in the preceding ATRI table relate only to drivers of large trucks. However, given the causation findings presented in the UMTRI research, BISC believes similar findings and predictions for bus and motorcoach drivers can be reasonably anticipated.

What are we asking for?

Just good old-fashioned traffic law enforcement.

BISC has requested IACP consider the establishment of a North American *zero tolerance* enforcement campaign against aggressive and unsafe driving by all bus and coach drivers. When a bus or motorcoach is observed being operated in an unsafe fashion by an enforcement officer – please have the officer pull it over in the first safe location and cite the driver.

Have the officer explain to passengers why stop is being made and that it is their, and the traveling public's, safety that is uppermost in the officer's mind.

Go to court and press the charge.

Appeal to the court not to reduce or mask the charge since this action allows unsafe drivers to continue to operate and endanger the public.

We need to hold bus drivers to a similar standard as airline pilots. After all, what they are tasked with doing is identical and the same level of great care and caution is expected by the public.

Please do not hesitate to contact Norman Littler, executive director, Bus Industry Safety Council, with comments, questions or requests for assistance at:

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