

# The Perfect Ride



CHOOSE YOUR TRUCK FOR COMFORT AND FOR PROFIT.

By **JOHN BAXTER**

**E**very truck has a different job to do. Figuring out what your truck will do is the first step in spec'ing a truck that will meet your comfort and business needs.

You'll need to pick the right specifications for the sleeper size and wheelbase, choose the right combination of power and fuel efficiency and match the drivetrain components for your truck's application. Much of what you will select is just as dependent on geography as freight. For example, trucks running in the city may need a shorter wheelbase and a smaller sleeper, while highway trucks may require higher horsepower to maintain speed and the right gearing and aerodynamics to cut down on your fuel bill.

The second part of spec'ing is proper design. You and your sales person need to design your truck so the parts work together and meet the bridge formula and other legal requirements. You need to be able to turn corners without having the cab side extenders hit the trailer, but also need to be able to close the cab-to-trailer gap for efficient highway cruising. You need to ensure you can cruise at the right rpm and start on the steepest hill you'll encounter with a full load. All this takes proper engineering.

The final piece of the spec'ing puzzle is spec'ing for resale, says Jim Sayre Sr. of G.L. Sayre Peterbilt and

International. The real price of a truck is what it costs new, minus what you sell it for. Often, paying a little more initially pays back a lot more at resale, giving you a free ride in extra luxury or with extra performance in the meantime.

Many truckers think about engines and horsepower when they consider buying a truck, but since most highway trucks are home and office for owner-operators, taking special time with the cab and sleeper is important. Still, that doesn't mean you should overspec those elements, says Larry Hess of Midway Truck Service of Bethel, Pa., a WesternStar dealer.

"Most truckers don't really need an 82-inch sleeper," Hess says. "My favorite for running over the road is the 68-inch. Regional applications can run 40- to 50-inch sizes. A 60-inch is too small for over-the road, but 80-90 inches is overkill. Common sense has to prevail."

An oversized sleeper may also limit your truck's maneuverability. "The length of the vehicle is dictated by where you're running," says George Steigerwalt, a salesman at Freightliner of Philadelphia. Regional operators might run a 230- to 240-inch wheelbase, but if you're running long-haul you might run one 265 to 280 inches long, which means a set-forward axle. If making deliveries within a metropoli-

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tan area, “maneuverability is always a function of wheelbase,” says Steigerwalt.

It usually pays to spec the premium-level interior for an on-highway truck, says Mike McColgan, truck remarketing development manager for Volvo Trucks North America. For example, a buyer of the Volvo VN780 can save \$500 to \$600 by choosing the Signature interior instead of the Elite, he says. “But the lost value at the time of resale is \$1,500 or more,” McColgan says.

Other popular specs include:

**CONDO SLEEPERS.** Owner-operators also like to spec trucks with raised roofs, common in fleet team operations.

**LONGER NOSE.** “The owner-operator customer seems to like the long nose, 132-inch BBC cab like the Freightliner Coronado, Kenworth W900L and Peterbilt 379,” Steigerwalt says. The square snouts and classic styling don’t perform as well aerodynamically but tend to bring more money at resale.

**BIG BORE ENGINES.** Uprateable 14- and 15-liter engines are worthwhile, especially at resale, “unless weight is critical,” Sayre says. But make sure you spec the components to go with the engine, or the uprateability will be worthless.

Vehicle height is critical in spec’ing. Make sure to specify low profile rubber if you must clear low bridges. And don’t get the idea you can adjust ride height with your air suspension. “If your suspension is out of spec, you mess up the driveline basics,” Sayre says.



Another large issue is frame rail specification. “Wheelbase dictates frame rails,” Steigerwalt says. “Follow the manufacturer’s guidelines. It doesn’t pay to skimp.” Sayre’s experience is that “the manufacturer dictates the correct frame gauge based on the wheelbase. A 379 Peterbilt will normally have a  $\frac{5}{16}$ -inch frame, but move up to a  $\frac{3}{8}$  after the wheelbase reaches a certain length.”

Still, there may be choices available, depending on how customized the truck maker’s manufacturing process is. Hess says, “I recommend  $\frac{1}{2}$ -inch rail for day cabs, but with a sleeper one size larger, use  $\frac{5}{16}$ -inch.” Strong rails offer safe handling and a better ride.

Should you specify aerodynamic devices, or buy a more aerodynamic body style, like a Century Class, Pete 387 or Kenworth T2000? Surprisingly, as with so many other aspects of engineering a truck, the best answer is that it depends on how you will use the truck. “Aero trucks versus the traditional designs can improve fuel economy 5-10 percent,” Sayre says. But all those extra aerodynamics may not help you much if your truck sits in traffic or climbs hills all day. And you may pay for that at resale because conventional designs tend to retain their value better.

“Fuel economy is important to all truckers, especially in the days of high diesel fuel prices. If you’re not running an aerodynamic model, such as Kenworth’s T600 or T2000, you can still select some fuel-saving options for other traditional-style trucks,” says Kenworth’s Steve Gilligan.

“Owner-operators would also be wise to consider low-maintenance components, like Mack’s UniMax front axles, which feature unitized wheel hubs that are permanently sealed with synthetic grease, eliminating maintenance costs,” says Tom Davis, Mack marketing manager for highway products.

“In the final analysis, before you buy you need to determine the best balance of comfort, fuel economy, resale value, and performance based on your specific needs and operating environment,” Gilligan says. ■

**HIGHWAY SPECS.** The highway trucks included in the spec listings represent the products from each manufacturer that are most popular with owner-operators for over-the-road uses. Consult a dealer for information on other models; contact information is available on Page 6.