

the **bottom** line

WHEN CHOOSING SEATS,
FEATURES COUNT.

By **SEAN KELLEY**

You're going to be sitting on it for years and hundreds of thousands of miles; you might as well spend some time spec'ing it. When owner-operators walk into a big rig showroom, their first order of business is usually chrome and horsepower. They seldom spend much time on seats, say manufacturers, even though the driver's seat is one of the two pieces of big rig equipment truckers interact with the most (the steering wheel is the other).

Such attitudes are probably short-sighted, say seat makers. A quality seat can make a big difference in health and level of fatigue at the end of the day. The right seat can prevent injuries and downtime and make work easier. And it's a lot easier today than it was 10 years ago to find a chair designed for comfort as well as durability.

What has changed about seats is dramatic:

- Support systems with up to seven adjustable air bladders in the cushions;
- Form-fitted metal and composite seat and back pans;
- Cushions that adjust in length and angle;
- Denser foam that can keep form longer;
- Adjustable suspensions that reduce bottoming and topping out; and
- Dozens of options ranging from heated cushions to electronic memory controls.

While adjustability, flexibility and creature comforts such as massage have become standard or at least offered as popular options, the biggest change in seats in the past 10 years is size. Plainly put, seat cushions that were once 18 inches wide have swollen to 20, 22 and 24 inches. Seat makers sell fewer 18-inch cushions because their customers – like the rest of America – have gotten bigger. Changes to truck cab design have given seat makers room to grow, too.



The right seat can make your life on the road more comfortable and more profitable — with less downtime because of injuries.

According to manufacturers, the typical seat order includes a cushion of at least 21 inches. Some drivers opt for 22-inch cushions, the maximum width allowed by most cab designs. Others squeeze in 24-inch cushions, the largest made for trucks by any seat manufacturer.

PREMIUM SEAT MANUFACTURERS OFFER TOP-OF-THE-LINE SUSPENSION SYSTEMS, SELF-LEVELING CHAIRS, AUTO-MEMORY, LEATHER, MASSAGE AND HEAT.

Although the average trucker may be getting bigger, changes in the driver pool also have affected seat design. Today's seats are much more adjustable, fitting the 4-foot-10-inch, 90-pound female driver and the 6-foot-10-inch, 400-pound cowboy of the road.

Seats are designed to fit between 95 and 98 percent of the driver population – a wide spectrum that includes drivers who are short but big, tall drivers who are thin and everything in between. The improved adjustability allows drivers of varying size to comfortably use the same seat.

Such adjustability costs more, as do options not included on truck seats as recently as 10 years ago. In fact an owner-operator can spend between \$300 and \$2,000 on a seat. What does two grand get you that \$300 doesn't? Premium seat manufacturers offer top-of-the-line suspension systems, self-leveling chairs, auto-memory, leather, massage and heat.

The features are worth it for some drivers for comfort and health reasons. Whereas basic seats offer a simple mechanical adjustment to support the back, better seats offer multiple air chambers that support the kidneys and the upper and lower lumbar. Seat pressure points can be changed throughout the day on some models, keeping drivers fresher.

That in turn allows for many more hours of driving without suffering fatigue, numbness or muscle pain. Other features such as active massage and heat also help back, leg and shoulder muscles cope with 10-, 12- or 14-hour workdays.

Seat makers also have made it possible to fine-tune common adjustments in functions such as recline and tilt. Generally, the more money a driver spends on a seat, the finer the adjustments. For example, a cheaper seat will allow a driver to adjust a seat in increments of 2.3 degrees. Fancier seats allow adjustments to half a degree.

Manufacturers also have made changes to suspension systems to smooth out big potholes while keeping drivers from bottoming or topping out on washboard roads.



Wider suspensions are available for bigger drivers to ease sway and lean as the truck takes curves and corners. Likewise, wider suspensions are better for truckers who work on and off road.

Shock absorbers also offer more fine tuning, allowing the suspension to be stiffened or loosened depending on the road conditions. Some suspensions can change even the viscosity of the fluid in the absorber, allowing for a wide range of adjustments to the seat suspension.

The more robust a suspension, the longer a seat will last and the more comfort drivers will enjoy. Better seat cushions also help. Most truck seats – even expensive ones – are typically foam over plywood or metal, but a few feature coiled springs, like quality furniture. The springs spread out weight more evenly over the entire cushion, relieving pressure points on the tailbone. Other seat makers feature molded steel seat pans and backs that help the foam fit to the body more ergonomically.

Seat coverings are also important, and most models are available in a variety of covers to suit the trucker's personal taste, from vinyl to leather to velour to synthetic leathers. Fabrics also have improved dramatically. Durable coatings and circular weaves mean the average cushion can go more miles and resist stains and wear. The cost of fabric is also a big factor; leather can add hundreds to the cost of a truck and be more difficult to take care of. Drivers who get in and out of trucks a lot or work in difficult and dirty conditions may want a fabric that cleans easily, whereas drivers who are on their keisters all day may choose a fabric purely for comfort and style.

Whatever seat you want is available. Just don't forget to spec' it out. ■

SEAT SPECS. The seats included in the spec listings represent the products from each manufacturer that are most popular with owner-operators. Consult a dealer for information on other models; contact information begins on Page 6.