Laura Crackel

WHEN PICKING A TRAILER FOR YOUR OPERATION, MAKE SURE IT CAN DO MORE THAN ONE JOB.

By JOHN BAXTER

flexible first

By the time most owner-operators decide to expand and buy a trailer, they have plenty of experience spec'ing trucks. That's a good thing, as a few basic rules for spec'ing a truck are also true for spec'ing a trailer.

First, figure out what the trailer will do most often, and make sure its specs match that application. Once you've done that, successful owner-operators recommend spec'ing a trailer that is flexible enough to haul other kinds of loads. Finally, as with trucks, it pays to spec light. If you can afford to spec your trailer with the least available weight, you'll be able to get in line for heavier loads.

Here are seven things to consider before heading to the dealer.

CONSTRUCTION. The three basic types of box vans are sheet-and-post, plate and fiberglass-reinforced plywood. Sheet-and-post, the lightest of the three, is popular among owner-operators and small fleets. Plate trailers are somewhat heavier, but provide the most interior space of the three. Finally, FRP vans are falling out of favor because of weight and maintenance issues.

The trailer lining is a major concern for owner-operators running vans, says Chris Adkins, senior vice president of sales and marketing at Great Dane. There is a desire to "eliminate plywood, which is maintenance-driven," Adkins says. The trend is also driven by "product preservation ... Textiles can be dragged in loading and can pick up splinters."

SPEC FLOORS THAT WILL STAND UP TO THE WEAR.

A market for plywood persists because composite linings cost more initially, but plywood wears out and needs to be replaced, while a composite liner is far more durable. "The money comes back," Adkins says.

For open trailers, construction choices include steel, aluminum or a combination. While steel is the traditional construction material used in open trailers, most new trailers are made of aluminum or aluminum-steel combos. Steel is cheaper up front, but aluminum is lighter, giving the trailer more carrying capacity. "The resale value, along with easier maintenance (on aluminum trailers), gives you an excellent payback," says Mike Monroe, sales manager of Ravens and Fontaine Trailers. "After five years is when you see your money coming back."

Adkins agrees. The decision to spec lighter materials is "driven by application. Ask yourself what products you haul ... Maintenance costs are also part of that equation. Look at payload and tonnage over 12 to 15 years, plus resale into the aftermarket."

SUSPENSION. While air-ride is more expensive, it gives you more options because many fleets and shippers require air-ride transport even when the load doesn't. Suspensions also account for a lot of weight and require the most maintenance. Spec'ing a light, easily maintained suspension will help you carry heavier loads and reduce downtime.

Look for fully integrated suspension, axle and brake systems. Such suspensions are often lighter, and you have to go to only one source for warranty and technical support. Spec components such as low-maintenance hubs that will allow you to save money and downtime.

FLEXIBILITY. Reefers, as well as certain open specialty trailers, are more expensive to buy and to operate, and they're heavier than dry vans, but you might make up the difference in more lucrative loads. If spec'ing a specialty trailer, make sure you have more than one use for it. If you don't, and your primary shipper disappears, you may not be able to find loads to match your trailer.

FLOORING. Because the flooring will get the most abuse, spec floors that will stand up to the wear. For example, a new, larger forklift often used in the beverage industry, because of its width, always takes the same track down the center of the van. That puts many times the normal stress on the flooring.

Spec a trailer that is strong enough to perform its primary task but flexible enough to do other jobs.

Monroe recommends welded-in floors rather than bolted-in ones. "Bolts require retorquing as a part of routine maintenance," he says.

WHEELBASE. A trailer's wheelbase is measured from the center of the kingpin to the center of the rear suspension. If the wheelbase is shorter, capacity goes up; if it is longer, capacity goes down.

AXLE SPACING. Study up on the Bridge Formula before you spec your trailer. This is a federal standard – adhered to by many states – that keeps rigs from putting too much load in too concentrated an area.

A standard tandem axle arrangement is limited to 34,000 pounds of total weight capacity. "But a 102-inch spacing between the two trailer axles gives you 20,000-pound capacity on each of those two axles," Monroe says. That's an important difference unless you know you'll never need to carry a load that heavy or that concentrated. Spec'ing spread axle means you can carry more weight on the rear end of the trailer and gives you more flexibility.

One drawback of the spread axle is that it tends to wear tires faster than a tandem axle. This can be minimized with smarter driving, trailer manufacturers say.

LIGHTING. Most of today's trailers are coming with LED lighting instead of traditional bulbs. This costs more up front but saves money, tickets and downtime because LEDs last so much longer than conventional lighting. The Fontaine Renegade, for example, offers a 10-year lifetime warranty on its LED lighting. LEDs also feature low amp draw, which can save fuel over time. ■

TRAILER SPECS. The trailers 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.