

High road

By Robin Brunet



Employers of professional drivers have their hands full when it comes to restricting the use of cell phones and other devices.

One of Vic Martin's worst workplace nightmares involves a driver rear-ending another vehicle while talking on a cell phone. Such an accident has the potential for a serious or life-threatening injury. "The truck's on-board computer and the driver's phone records would guarantee a successful litigation against us," says Martin, general manager of Excel Transportation in Prince George. "Our reputation would be ruined, and success in court would do little to help the

injured parties, or ease the terrible mental strain on the driver."

No such mishap has occurred, but Martin has good cause to worry. According to a discussion paper prepared by the ministry of public safety and solicitor general, driver distraction in B.C. is associated with about 117 deaths a year, and 1,400 hospitalizations. The financial impact of these deaths and injuries amounts to nearly \$1 billion annually. Moreover, a 2005 study by the U.S.-based Insurance Institute for Highway Safety

shows that drivers using cell phones are four times as likely to cause a crash as other drivers.

Findings such as these were the impetus behind the January 2010 passage of Bill 15, the *Motor Vehicle Amendment Act* that restricts and governs hand-held communication devices. Under this bill, drivers cannot hold, operate, communicate with, or watch the screen of a cell phone, nor can they send or receive text messages or e-mail. Bill 15 prohibits personal digital assistants and hand-held

Roy Dondale, operations supervisor and safety director for Excel Transportations, demonstrates the potential distractions hand-held devices can present for working drivers.

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—Vic Martin, general manager of Excel Transportation

electronic computing devices; it allows hand microphones, CB radios, and other devices under certain conditions.

At first blush, the regulations seem inconsistent: why are hand microphones and CB radios less harmful than cell phones? “Because you simply depress a button to talk to another person, you don’t need to take your eyes off the road and look at a screen, which is the epitome of distracted driving,” says Louise Yako, vice president of policy, communications, and partnerships for the B.C. Trucking Association. Nonetheless, a debate continues over the use of hands-free devices in vehicles, a practice the

U.S.-based National Safety Council considers a further source of distracted driving.

Lead by example

When Martin began receiving complaints that some of his drivers had been spotted chatting on the phone while running amber lights or pushing the speed limit, he took instant action. “This was prior to the passing of Bill 15,” he explains. “We took a hard line in restricting cell phone use. But we also led by example and obliged our management team to do away with cell phone use as well. It was initially tough to let phones go to

voice-mail, but very soon it was understood and accepted.”

Like many short-haul operations, Excel’s 100 truck fleet communicates via push-button VHF. “It’s a great system for professional use – but as would be the case with CBs – all of our drivers hear the broadcasts. And that’s why so many professional drivers find cell phones attractive,” Martin says. “Fortunately, Excel has a strong culture of safety. So after we made the commitment to lead by example, it was relatively easy to persuade our drivers to pull over to a safe zone or wait until delivery or pick-up to make their private calls.”

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Don't assume all devices are safe

Yako says Martin's success with his employers is typical of companies that have robust health and safety policies: "Some companies may have a harder time getting drivers to comply with Bill 15, but one effective strategy is to simply emphasize that the restrictions aren't just company policy but provincial law."

While cell phones with Bluetooth and other hands-free devices are allowed under Bill 15, Yako says these devices still have the potential to distract drivers. "This is why professional drivers who receive multiple dispatches throughout the day should check them at pick-up and drop-off points when it's safe to do so," she says.

Yako worries that some devices may look like cell phones, and therefore cause problems with enforcement: "As long as these devices are attached to the driver somewhere on the truck instead of being held, they can be operated legally." This practice, she points out, will also prevent police from assuming the device is a cell phone.

Empower yourself

WorkSafeBC transportation industry specialist Kevin Bennett says the organization is developing a safety management program to be used as a best-practices model for professional drivers. "Our overall view is that any distraction is dangerous," he says.

If you're a manager of a company whose operations rely on professional drivers, or whose employees use vehicles in the

course of their work, consider the following tips, adapted from information provided by the B.C. Automobile Association Traffic Safety Foundation.

- Be safe. Develop a safe driving policy that addresses the use of electronic devices and apply it to all employees, contractors, and even volunteers.
- Promote and clearly communicate electronic device policy to all employees, contractors, and volunteers.
- Define and communicate the contractual consequences for non-compliance, including disciplinary measures.


Empower your drivers

Pass along the following smart driving tips to your drivers, from www.drivecellsafe.ca:

- If your cell phone rings while driving, let it go to voice-mail or, better yet, turn it off to avoid the temptation of picking it up.
- Pull over to a safe location before you answer or return a call.

- Implement a five-minute delay rule: leave a message on your voice-mail letting callers know you'll call them back when it's safe to do so. Create a culture where people don't expect you to answer the phone immediately.
- When using a hands-free device, keep the conversation brief, keep a consistently safe speed, and ensure that your device is securely fixed to your vehicle and doesn't obstruct your view.

Martin offers some parting thoughts. "The intent of our discussions and training with Excel employees is to minimize all driving distractions. The cell phone gets primary attention as the most significant concern. But we also talk about drinking coffee and smoking while driving, which we strongly discourage."

Yako says there's no such thing as safe multi-tasking while driving. "By addressing the issue of driver distraction overall instead of focusing on a single issue, you can create a truly effective safe driving policy." 



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