

Preventing runaway vehicles - a simple safety message

Runaway vehicles are something most large fleets experience but Fleet Managers are often unaware of them.

Unless injury or damage occurs there's no evidence and a driver is hardly likely to admit to a near-miss so it is impossible for management to estimate their frequency.

But talk to any gathering of drivers and many will be able to relate to a personal experience or knowledge of a colleague's near miss.

However as some Fleet Managers know to their cost when an accident does happen it is usually a big one.

Fatality or injury is almost inevitable and damage to vehicles and premises is always extensive.

In most runaway instances there is no failure of the brakes but the handbrake is off and the driver is not in the cab.

In fact the Health and Safety Executive reported that no fewer than 165 employees were killed or injured by a driverless vehicle in just 12 months. So how can a professional driver forget to apply the handbrake?

The answer is human nature, pre-occupation with his delivery schedule or any number of other distractions.

Even with driver training programmes and strict operating procedures drivers sometimes fail to observe simple safety rules, with potentially fatal consequences.

The problem is that the one time he does forget may be his last time.

Having come to a standstill a vehicle may remain stationary even without the handbrake being on.

It is only when the driver leaves the cab to load or operate equipment that the problem materialises.

Then when the vehicle moves the driver is unlikely to be able to climb back into the cab to stop it. This is often where driver fatalities occur. The problem is even more common on vehicles where drivers make frequent stops for example refuse collection and recycling.

Of course many new vehicles now have warning buzzers in the cab to alert the driver to a variety of situations.

Rather than helping the driver these often serve to confuse when the same buzzer is used to warn that the lights are on, the door is open or the handbrake is off. This means that the buzzer is simply ignored, or worse still the driver may disable the warning system completely.

Good news is that many potential runaways can easily be prevented by the simple addition of a low-cost warning device manufactured by O.W.L. Vehicle Electronic Systems Limited.

This can replace an existing warning buzzer or be a stand-alone installation.

It can be specified on new vehicles or retro-fitted during a normal service.

As a once-only addition to each vehicle the cost of the product is a minute part of its whole life cost and can potentially save the operator money as well as reputation.

O.W.L. Operations Director Simon Phipps says "Some years ago the Transport Manager of a large national fleet turned us down stating that with hundreds of vehicles and self-insurance it was cheaper for them to run a few people over than equip the fleet with safety products. I don't think he would get away with that attitude now, but it is interesting to note that many companies still hold off until a major incident has occurred and then rush to retro-fit their entire fleet."

The handbrake warning system from O.W.L. is triggered automatically and uses a real human voice to instruct "driver...apply the handbrake".

It only operates when the driver's door is opened whilst the handbrake is off so there is no driver annoyance. It's a polite reminder that is heard only when the potential danger situation arises.

If the vehicle has a radio in the cab, the warning system mutes the radio when the message is sounding so there is no excuse for the driver not being aware of the danger.

One version of the system also has a second weatherproof loudspeaker fitted outside the cab so that the driver will still hear the reminder if he leaves the vehicle and closes the door behind him. The message continues to sound even if the door is closed, until the handbrake is applied. This means that anyone else outside the vehicle, including the Fleet Manager in the depot, will immediately become aware of the danger and act accordingly.

Because the warning device cannot affect the braking system in any way it is not a notifiable alteration to the vehicle.

Fleet Managers are constantly under pressure to make savings, especially when running costs are increasing. But there are some areas that really should not bear the brunt of budget cuts and safety must always be at the top of that list.

Small one-off costs can always be justified for a safety-critical application and with the level of safety legislation now in place senior corporate management increasingly recognises this.

The potential costs of just one runaway can be enormous and management at all levels has a duty to militate against the possibility of every incident.

Fines for health and safety breaches are even more severe for larger operators and can be financially crippling for smaller companies. Local Authorities are not immune either and taxpayers are not amused when local taxes are used to pay them off.

Under the 2007 Corporate Manslaughter and Corporate Homicide Act the fines are unlimited and companies can be forced to publish details of convictions and fines. So apart from the moral implications of company vehicles causing death or injury, preventable incidents don't do much to enhance the PR of any organisation.

But it's not all doom and gloom. The sensible solution is to spend the budget wisely and still be able to demonstrate that you and your company have taken adequate safety precautions.

As well as handbrake warning systems O.W.L. produce talking sounders for a wide range of safety and security applications both on vehicles and in premises.

Real human voice warning messages are proven to be far more effective than any other warning system.

They instantly identify the potential danger and generate an immediate reaction. The system is therefore equally effective with just about any situation and the precise wording used can be tailored to suit individual requirements.

Among many others there are vehicle-specific messages for tippers, skip loaders, mobile cranes, freezer bodies, refuse collection and recycling vehicles, sweepers, mobile banks and cash in transit vehicles.

Specialist safety and security messages are available for buses, coaches, school minibuses and social services ambulances.

Equipment-specific messages relate to tail-lifts, lorry loaders, elevated platforms and moving decks.

And generic applications for every type of vehicle include reversing and attack alarms as well as replacements for warning lights, beepers and buzzers.

Simon Phipps believes that O.W.L. can provide a suitable warning system for any vehicle or plant no matter how specialised and he promises "If we don't have a product on the shelf we'll make one. A client only needs to tell us what the product has to do and what message it has to convey and we'll do the rest. Our minimum order quantity is just one and then we have another product to add to our very extensive portfolio".

For more information:

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