

HOW TO MINIMIZE DISTRACTED DRIVING

By some estimates, distracted driving accounts for nearly a quarter of all U.S. traffic crashes. Fleets need to make sure they are taking steps to limit their drivers' distractions.





There's little debate that distracted driving has become the scourge of modern driving. This isn't to say that drivers haven't always had to contend with distractions. Billboards, radios, air conditioning, eating, daydreaming have and will likely continue to play a part in distracting drivers from their primary role of driving. But today's distractions have amplified the problem.

It is crucial for fleets to address the problem of distracted driving as a root cause of fleet-related crashes to keep drivers safe.

DISTRACTING BEHAVIOR

While traffic deaths dipped slightly (1.8%) in 2017 to 37,133 from 2016's 37,806 (a 5.6% rise from the previous year), the number of deaths are at a level nearly equivalent to a decade ago when traffic fatalities were trending downward, and at a time when there is increased awareness about the dangers of distracted driving and vehicle technology is available to monitor and prevent it.

There are a several reasons why the numbers have trended upward, beginning with 2015's 8.1% increase in fatalities, the largest year-over-year rise in the past 50 years. At the same time, there has been a concurrent and record rise in the number of miles driven. As with road fatalities, DOT and NHTSA reported that vehicle



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miles traveled increased in 2015, in this case, by 3.5%, the highest year-over-year increase in nearly 25 years, and 2016 saw a 2.2% increase.

More time on the road certainly could account for some of the increases in the number of fatal collisions, but it could be argued that distracted driving is a bigger culprit. Consider, that in 2016, it is estimated that distracted driving behavior was responsible for 3,450 deaths — but the year-over-year increase in total number of deaths was 1,976. In 2015, NHTSA estimated that 10% of all traffic fatalities and 15% of all injury crashes were related to distracted-driving behavior.

These numbers are likely under-reported, according to the National Safety Council (NSC), which estimates that 27% of all vehicular crashes are related to cell-phone use alone.

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A survey by the NSC found that most distracted driving incidents had a root cause in the way drivers were behaving behind the wheel, typically with the technology they brought into the car. The 2016 survey of more than 3,400 adult U.S. drivers found that they engaged in the following distracted behaviors frequently or occasionally:

- **51%** made or answered calls hands-free with headsets, speakerphones, and in-vehicles systems
- **32%** reviewed or sent text messages
- **23%** reviewed or sent an e-mail
- **23%** glanced at, read, or posted social media messages
- **21%** surfed the internet
- **19%** made or answered phone calls with handheld devices
- **19%** looked at, took, or posted photos or videos
- **14%** watched TV or a movie on their phone
- **14%** participated in a video chat

In addition to these obvious hands-off-the-wheel and mind-off-the-road activities, there is another distracted driving behavior that can be included in the distracted category: driving while drowsy. In fact, the AAA Foundation for Traffic Safety identified drowsiness as a factor in up to 9.5% of all examined crashes.

Taken together, distracted driving, no matter the cause, is a behavior that fleet managers must address in policy and enforce through accountability.



SETTING POLICY

Fleet managers should start their efforts to combat distracted driving in the fleet's comprehensive safety policy. Fleet and company stakeholders and partner experts, such as the company's fleet management company (FMC) or fleet safety provider, should work together to add anti-distracted driving policies within the larger fleet safety program that address specific trouble areas that the fleet may be experiencing, and general principles that will keep new ones from cropping up.

The following are an example of how this mixture of the specific and general approach could be handled:

- **Don't multi-task:** Drivers should only do one thing while they're driving — drive. They should never multi-task while driving, in particular use their smartphones to text, video chat, or post to social media while driving.
- **Keep eyes on the road:** A key task while driving is keeping your eyes on the road in front of you, and avoid looking at "cool" buildings or eye-catching billboards. It's recommended that drivers move their eyes every two seconds and check their mirrors every five to eight seconds.
- **Don't eat/drink while driving:** Eating or drinking while driving can be a significant distraction. Drivers should eat before or after their trips. If it is necessary to eat before arriving at a destination, they should pull off the road at a safe place and eat their meal while their vehicle is stopped.
- **Avoid complicated tasks:** Using technology, such as voice-activated systems or hands-free devices, may seem safe. However, these systems still distract a driver's attention away from the road.
- **Never use a phone while driving:** If a driver must make a phone call, he or she should pull over to a safe place and make the call. Even using a hands-free phone while driving could result in a crash. Drivers can remain distracted for 27 seconds after making a call, even if they use a hands-free device, according to the AAA.
- **Get organized:** Driving with clutter all over the vehicle is a recipe for distraction. Drivers should organize paperwork and properly store electronic devices before heading out.



- **Store gear properly:** When storing their paper and gear, drivers should do so in the proper compartments so it doesn't roll around the vehicle or otherwise become a distraction. Reaching for a loose item — whether a small electronic device or a piece of paper — while driving could be catastrophic.
- **Make all adjustments before hitting the road:** Drivers should set GPS, climate control, and sound systems, as well as adjust mirrors and seats before setting out on the road.
- **Groom at home:** Drivers should never dress or groom while driving. They should do so at home prior to heading out for the day.
- **Never Drive Drowsy:** Drowsiness can impair driving ability as much or even more than alcohol, according to the National Sleep Foundation. Drivers who feel they are drowsy should immediately — and safely — pull off the road and find a place to rest.

This combination of the specific and the general should help fleet personnel address most causes of distracted driving.

MAKING DRIVERS ACCOUNTABLE

It's not enough to set a policy — it must be enforced and drivers must be held accountable with defined penalties for non-compliance.

Dictating a policy without explaining it or without adequate training about how to adhere to it will lead to non-compliance and failure — in this case continued collisions and the possibility of the fleet being found liable in the aftermath of an injury or fatality crash.

Education is important, particularly when it comes to distracted driving. That's because a vast majority of adult drivers think that they can both drive and

engage in a distracting behavior safely. In fact, about 80% of adult drivers think they can manage texting while driving, according to a survey by the Virginia Tech Transportation Institute. Education, particularly showing the negative effects of distracted driving behavior — such as making a phone call or texting — will go a long way toward driver buy-in for the distracted driving policy. During education sessions, it has to be made clear that the company is committed to drivers' safety and why safety should be important to the driver — especially in terms of their well-being. Fleet and driver managers should tailor these messages in ways that will motivate their drivers and avoid generic messages.

Even with the proper motivation, drivers must know that they will be held accountable for non-compliance to the strict distracted driving avoidance policies you've outlined. These penalties should be clearly enumerated and it should be made clear that everyone is equally accountable, and that fleet and company leadership sticks to that promise in practice.



As part of the fleet's distracted-driving policy, there should be mechanisms put in place to monitor driver compliance. There are a number of ways this can be handled — the fleet's FMC or fleet safety provider can guide solutions suited to the fleet's needs and goals — among them are telematics, driver monitoring programs (including simple 1-800-How's-My-Driving initiatives), and collision-avoidance programs to help identify risky driving behavior, such as hard braking or acceleration, which can be signs of distracted driving, before they lead to a crash. Apps are now becoming available

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that disable drivers' phones while their vehicles are in motion, increasing the effectiveness of anti-cell-phone use policies.

In addition to having penalties, fleets should also set up rewards programs to emphasize the positive benefits of the safety program. Driver scorecards can be used to identify drivers that need remediation and reward those who are safety stars. Rewards should be public and include a prize ranging from a cash bonus to a trophy. Competition with a reward will add a level of fun and further motivation that could help fuel better compliance.

Unless distracted behavior is endemic to the fleet, remediation should be kept at an individual level. Be aware that penalizing all of the drivers with remediation for the bad behavior of a few could have a significant, negative, alienating impact on the efforts to curb distracted driving and spark non-compliance with the fleet safety policy as a whole.

ONGOING PROCESS

A distracted driving policy — as with any safety program — needs ongoing cultivation and refreshing.

New technologies that both add to distraction and combat it are continually coming on the market and must be addressed. Drivers need ongoing motivation to remain engaged. And the policy as a whole should be revisited on a regular basis to make sure it is still relevant to the needs of the fleet and, most important, effective in curbing distractions.

Again, a fleet's FMC or fleet safety provider can be a powerful ally in the effort to stop distracted driving. These safety experts can help craft, manage, and cultivate the fleet's distracted driving program to make it more effective.

By minimizing distracted driving, fleets can keep their drivers safe, the fleet productive, and liability costs to a minimum.

