



FEATURE



Our Great Challenge: Protecting Drivers and Trucks from Hijackings and Terrorism

[By Martin Euler]

In the Middle East, Europe, and Asia, truck hijackings and bombings are a growing menace, and the risk of these attacks reaching our shores is a real threat.

The challenge facing the commercial trucking industry is to provide the most effective protection for drivers and trucks. In an emergency, telematics systems that monitor trucks, especially those that have real-time reporting to a command center, will empower drivers to communicate instantly and effectively to secure help. The communication can be by satellite or telephone depending on the location, and the vehicle doesn't need to be started for it to work.

The installation of such systems can deter attacks. Terrorists as well as thieves will rapidly learn the effectiveness of such systems in foiling their attempts.

The key is timing. A system that only finds out about an emergency if and when the driver can reach a telephone is of little help. To counteract any threat or attack an immediate response is critical. A real-time telematics system can do just that. In an actual emergency, the system can immobilize the vehicle to stop hijackings in their tracks—instantly—as well as alert the local police to come to the exact location.

To forestall hijacking, for example, our firm, Astrata Group, has developed and implemented a technology that immobilizes a truck, reducing its speed slowly and safely

until it comes to a complete stop. Also, should a trucking company become aware that a hijacking is planned, the driver can be alerted. Sophisticated telematics systems can be equipped with personal two-way communication devices to alert command centers to emergencies and also notify drivers instantaneously regarding problems ahead.

Indeed, in a hijacking situation, unlike a cell phone, the driver's personal device can silently call a specified number for immediate assistance. In such a case, the command center automatically responds to the call; there is no need for the driver to do anything but push a panic button. The command center can dispatch the police and even listen covertly to what is happening in the truck.

One of the most pressing issues is the need to prevent or sabotage terrorist attacks on trucks carrying hazardous materials. In Singapore, we developed a comprehensive system for dealing with a variety of potentially dangerous situations that could occur with trucks carrying hazardous materials.

For one thing, trucks carrying hazardous materials are only permitted to follow designated routes to make sure that they

are not driven into vulnerable areas. If for any reason a truck deviates from its assigned route, it will be stopped by the immobilizer with which it has been equipped. The immobilizer can also be used to stop the truck from being deliberately driven into a government building or highly populated area.

If for any reason the driver wants to change the assigned route, the telematics system is flexible, and it can be changed en route to reflect changes in circumstance such as road closures. Therefore, in an emergency the boundaries that the truck may cross can be changed.

Moreover, using a mix of permanent or temporary installations, this system can provide protection for trucks that are always used for hazardous materials, trucks that are only temporarily being used for hazardous materials, or even trucks carrying hazardous materials that will only be in a country temporarily.

By the way, the telematics device is small—not as big as a modern cellular phone—and is easily concealed and hard to detect. When temporary use is called for, we have a device that can be attached to the vehicle in a variety of places and then removed when the vehicle is no longer in the country or



FEATURE

is no longer being used to carry hazardous materials.

In the United States, when it comes to providing security for drivers and trucks, telematics systems can enhance driver security in many other commonly occurring situations—not just terrorist attacks. In the instance of a financially motivated hijacking, a robbery, an accident, or a vehicle failure, a telematics system with instantaneous communication can alert the command center to the problem, and the command center can alert the local police or emergency services.

Take, for example, a truck breakdown on a deserted road late at night. Though the driver might have a cell phone with which to call for help, a telematics system with two-way communication could instantly pinpoint the exact location of the vehicle so that help could be on the way. Moreover, the system has an impact sensor that alerts the command center if a driver is unconscious

and unable to communicate. There are also features that detect cargo tampering as well as driver identification in case the vehicle is started by an unknown individual.

Modern telematics technology has made remarkable strides in the past few years. As the dangers to drivers and trucks multiply, the telematics industry is keeping pace by developing protective safety devices that will help drivers handle any emergency.

About the Author

Martin Euler, chief executive officer of Astrata Group, has had more than 25 years of management and operations experience. He held management positions with Racal Energy Resources and Racal Survey in the U.S. and Europe from 1984 to 1999. Before joining Astrata as CFO in 2004, he was director of the Americas region for Thales GeoSolutions. He was named Astrata's CEO in 2006.

Astrata Group, based in Costa Mesa, CA, provides proprietary hardware and software that control and monitor the movement of assets and people. The tremendous advantage of Astrata's technology is its adaptability to many applications, from homeland security to covert operations using "over-the-air" programmability.

Astrata has sold its products to businesses and governments in Southeast Asia, Europe, and the Middle East for homeland security, public safety, fleet management, workforce monitoring, emergency services, transportation, and construction.

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