

Salesman Dies from Vehicle Rollover in Wyoming

SUMMARY

A 45 year old male road salesperson died at the scene from injuries received when the car he was driving left an Interstate roadway at an estimated speed of 95 miles per hour and overturned. The driver, who was not wearing seatbelts, was ejected from the vehicle. The vehicle rolled 2½ times, coming to rest on its top.

Employers may be able to minimize the potential for occurrence of this type of incident through the following precautions:

- **Provide road salespersons with driver training similar to, or more intensive than, the National Safety Council Defensive Driving Course**
- **Periodically review driving habits with salespersons and counsel employees about safe driving as a company policy**
- **Establish, post, and enforce policy opposing moving traffic violations (especially speed and alcohol violations) and advocating use of occupant restraints.**

INTRODUCTION

In the late evening of Tuesday, March 23, 1993, a salesperson representing an out-of-state automotive parts distributor had been calling on accounts near the state border and was enroute to a town further in-state, when his vehicle left the roadway and overturned. The victim was driving his personal car under contract with the company to travel on their behalf and be reimbursed for mileage and other travel costs. The vehicle was travelling at a high rate of speed when it left the roadway to the right, returned and recrossed the two lanes of highway and entered the median on the left, where the driver was ejected as the vehicle overturned.

INVESTIGATION

Through a reciprocal notification agreement with the Wyoming Department of Transportation, the WY-Wyoming FACE Program was notified of the incident by written report on March 29, 1993. On receipt of such notification WY- Wyoming FACE investigators requested and received reports relating to the incident, and reviewed the circumstances with company representatives.

The victim had worked for the company for nearly six years in the position of road salesperson. In that capacity, he called on accounts to sell and service automotive parts and oil products in an area including

the northeast corner of Wyoming. At the time of the incident he was driving alone, traveling between towns that were part of his sales territory.

The Interstate Highway on which he was travelling consisted of four lanes (two in each direction separated by a median). The road was concrete, with two 12' lanes, an 8' shoulder on the right, and a 5' shoulder on the left. The direction of travel was almost due west, going into a gentle upgrade curve to the left. The pavement was dry with pavement markings and a worn/polished surface. It was dark and the sky was clear. There was nothing to obscure the driver's vision within the range of his headlights.

The vehicle was traveling at a high rate of speed (estimated at 95 miles per hour on a road that was posted for 65 mph), and the driver's blood alcohol level was .20 (twice the legal presumptive level for driving in Wyoming). Apparently the driver drifted off the right side of the road as the road curved to the left, drove beyond the edge of the shoulder and struck a delineator post. He then over-reacted by turning sharply to the left, crossed the 37' roadway and entered the median to the left, at which time the vehicle became airborne, ejecting the driver and rolling two and a half times, finally landing back on the highway on its top. The driver received multiple rib fractures and lacerations of the right and left lungs and liver, and traumatic rupture of the right ventricle and atrium of the heart resulting in exsanguination and acute cardiac failure, and was pronounced dead at the scene within 15 minutes of the incident. Ambulance personnel were notified approximately four minutes after the incident occurred, and were on the scene eight minutes after notification. Law enforcement investigators arrived some six minutes after ambulance personnel.

The company has been in business for 30 years, employing 250 people in various manufacturing and distribution jobs. The victim was one of 25 outside salesmen, and covered the territory that was most remote from the main office. He maintained less than daily but greater than weekly telephone contact with the sales manager, but met with him face-to-face only once or twice a year. General contact between management and sales personnel is more frequent, allowing supervisors greater opportunity to identify and prevent potential problems. The company takes pride in treating its sales personnel like family.

There is a designated safety officer, and safety rules and procedures are available, but are primarily designed for warehouse workers rather than outside salespersons. The policy of seatbelt use is included in the employee handbook that is provided to all outside sales people. Training is provided through a combination of classroom, manuals, vendor consulting, and on-the-job with an emphasis on product knowledge and sales and service techniques. Encouragement of safe driving practices is primarily through face to face contact between the salespersons and the sales managers, and often occurs while they are driving together.

Outside salespersons are paid on a basis of salary/commission with reimbursement provided for mileage and occasionally lodging. No reimbursement is provided for meals or entertainment of clients. There was no indication to the company that the victim had taken a client out for drinks, or had stopped for drinks enroute to his next destination. Had the company known that the victim would be drinking enroute to his next destination, they would have strongly disapproved. The most probable means the company would have of knowing that an outside salesperson drank between calls would be a complaint from a customer. Such client response would result in an immediate action by the company.

CAUSE OF DEATH

The Medical Examiner listed the cause of death as acute cardiac failure due to exsanguination.

RECOMMENDATIONS/DISCUSSION

This incident was preventable in that the driver could have maintained control of his vehicle by driving within the posted speed limit and if he had not also been under the influence of alcohol. Whether or not seat belts would have reduced the severity of injury has not been determined, but studies have shown that belted drivers are better able to control vehicle movement by being held firmly behind the wheel, rather than being subjected to the forces that cause the driver's body to slide from side to side with the vehicle's motion. In any instance, he would certainly not have been less likely to survive if he had remained with the vehicle than he was by being ejected.

The victim's driving record suggested a history of negligent vehicle operation, having been involved in an accident and also receiving three other speeding violations within a fourteen month period. The potential for violation is high due to the number of miles traveled as a salesman, but this violation rate was serious enough to be an indicator of severe deficiencies in his ability to operate his vehicle safely. While a balance is needed between an employee's right to privacy and an employer's interest in worker safety, periodic review of driving behavior seems beneficial.

Companies employing road salespersons should be aware of the dangers involved in driving long distances and being on the road late at night. Schedules should be prepared and presented for approval to keep times and distances within the realm of safety. Sales representatives are the clearest image most people have of the companies they represent, and it is to the company's advantage to be represented by sales people who drive responsibly and thus protect the lives of the persons with whom they share the roadway.

Beyond a company's concern for the welfare of its employees, there is an economic benefit to providing training and establishing policy that gives employees an incentive to be safe drivers. It is to a business's advantage to set and strictly enforce policy that will encourage its employed drivers to wear seat belts and to obey traffic laws and safety practices. Such employees recognize that the company is concerned about their personal safety, and have a far better safety record than those who are not governed by safety policies within their companies.

This incident could be used as a valuable learning tool for the company to encourage other employees toward improved driving practices. The factors involved in this incident combine a number of potential hazards for travelling sales people. The victim was driving alone, late at night, going from one destination to a town where his next business opportunity was to take place. He had apparently stopped at a bar before continuing his trip, and was driving under the influence of alcohol. He was apparently in a hurry to reach his destination, as he was traveling in excess of the speed limit. The most essential life-saving feature that he could have had was the seatbelt that was available but not in use.

People who drive for a living are constantly exposed to the possibility of these same hazards. Highway Safety professionals point to the three most common factors in fatal traffic injuries as speed, alcohol, and absence of occupant restraints. All three of the factors were evident in this crash. There were no defects in either the vehicle or the travelway, and no other vehicles involved in the incident. The single-

vehicle crash was a direct result of a driver who was driving too fast and under the influence of an intoxicating beverage. The severity of the crash was enhanced by the fact that the driver was unbelted.

FATAL ACCIDENT CIRCUMSTANCES AND EPIDEMIOLOGY (Wyoming FACE) PROJECT

The National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH), Division of Safety Research (DSR), performs Fatal Accident Circumstances and Epidemiology (Wyoming FACE) investigations when a participating state reports an occupational fatality and requests technical assistance. The goal of these evaluations is to prevent fatal work injuries in the future by studying the working environment, the worker, the task the worker was performing, the tools the worker was using, the energy exchange resulting in fatal injury, and the role of management in controlling how these factors interact.

States participating in this study include: Kentucky, Maryland, North Carolina, Ohio, Pennsylvania, South Carolina, Tennessee, Virginia, and West Virginia.

NIOSH Funded/State-based Wyoming FACE Projects providing surveillance and intervention capabilities to show a measurable reduction in workplace fatalities include: Alaska, California, Colorado, Georgia, Indiana, Iowa, Massachusetts, New Jersey, Minnesota, Missouri, Wisconsin and Wyoming.

Additional information regarding this report is available from:

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Please use information listed on the Contact Sheet on the NIOSH FACE web site to contact [In-house FACE program personnel](#) regarding In-house FACE reports and to gain assistance when State-FACE program personnel cannot be reached.