

ADVANCES IN HITCH TECHNOLOGY FOLLOW FAST-CHANGING VEHICLE DESIGN AND TECHNOLOGY.

5th-wheel towing units placed in a truck's bed are well designed for hauling large loads and recreational vehicles. Photo from Curt Mfg.

Tow to Tow

By Phil Sasso

Whether they're hauling a trailer full of equipment for work or a boat/camper for pleasure your customer wants a towing hitch that's strong, easy-to-use and safe.

If you don't currently sell hitches, you should know that they've come a long way from the tow hitch Uncle Fred used to tug the pop-up camper behind his family's station wagon. In fact, even if you do sell hitches, you should be aware there have been many advances in hitch technology even in just the past few years.

"In the past five years truck towing capacities have increased quite a bit," says Jim McKissick of Curt Mfg., Eau Claire, Wis. This is especially true of three-quarter-ton and one-ton pickups — most common in work trucks. Many hitch manufacturers have responded to this growing demand by developing higher-capacity hitch lines.

This higher capacity also has opened the

way to more rugged 2.5" hitch receiver openings adding another choice beyond the old standby 2" and 1.25" openings.

On the flip side of this trend, consumer vehicles today have become lighter and more fuel efficient, says Mark Gage of Plymouth, Mich.-based Cequent Group. This has had a downward influence on the towing capacity of the average consumer car or van. Unfortunately, this means a lot more customers are attempting to "pull, haul or carry more than the vehicle is designed to handle," says Gage.

Hitch makers are now challenged with the critical task of designing vehicle-specific hitches with greater tongue weight that flex under load. This, and the ever-changing nature of vehicle body designs, has led to a trend toward more vehicle-specific, custom fit hitches versus the old universal "multi-fit" hitch, Gage says.

Fit is critical to a hitch design, says

McKissick. "A hitch for a previous model year [may fit] but not to our standard," he says. "Let's say the receiver is more visible beneath the bumper than we would like; Curt generally offers an additional part number so that we can provide a greater custom fit rather than just carry that previous year's hitch over."

And, adds John Tiger of Bosal USA, Lavonia, Ga., "Hitches are always changing. In the past decade there has been an increased focus on design and materials' efficiency relative ... to the intended use and related carrying capacity of the hitch. ... Manufacturers already are experimenting with different materials to save weight yet not lose significant strength or durability properties."

Hitch makers also are adding features that make hitches more user-friendly, says Mandy Johnson of Pender, Neb.-based Blue Ox. New hitch systems are lighter,

but stronger, and new technologies, like the rotating style latch on the Blue Ox SwayPro lets users secure and release the tongue bracket with less force, then swings conveniently out of the way when not in use.

Corrosion-resistant coatings and paints are another area that continue to evolve, says Cequent's Gage. Coating durability has been improved to resist the "brutal environment" hitches face under a vehicle including road salt, stones and other road debris.

ELECTRONICS CONTINUE TO EVOLVE

Not only has the technology behind the materials and design evolved, but the wiring and electronics have become more sophisticated, as well. As automakers continue to add more standard accessories and use more advanced onboard chips, the modern vehicle electrical systems has become "fairly stressed," notes Curt's McKissick.

"Wiring harnesses have also improved over the past few years," McKissick continues. "Curt started using surface-mount electronics in our wiring harnesses three or four years ago." Surface mount electronics reduce the heat generated by electronics and increase product life, according to McKissick.

As automakers incorporated more onboard computer technology like electronic control modules (ECMs), they began reducing the size and current-carrying capacity, says Bosal's Tiger. "Simply put, that meant that the vehicle wiring and ECM could not handle the added loads of trailer wiring. Shortly thereafter, in the early 2000s as the sales of trailers rapidly grew, the trend of installing more and more lights on trailers (for greater visibility and safety, but also for more 'bling') grew, as well. These added lights placed an even greater load on tow vehicles' onboard wiring and computers."

These electronic advances have also made it necessary to offer more sophisticated technology to isolate the trailer electronics from the vehicle's network, says Gage.

"Today's harnesses typically include sophisticated battery-powered modules," says Tiger. "[They] not only draw power directly from the tow vehicle battery to power the trailer lights, but also feature non-invasive circuit protection to keep vehicle wiring and components protected from crippling shorts and power surges

due to faulty or improper trailer wiring. Even the connectors (both vehicle and trailer end) are of much higher quality than they were a few years ago, featuring advanced plastics that weather UV rays better without becoming brittle, and weatherproof sealed connections for a longer lifespan."

Also the influence of new systems, like pulse width modulation (PWM), are affecting the ways accessories are designed," says McKissick. "These systems use a unique wiring configuration so our converters and t-connectors must be designed accordingly."

SWAY CONTROL

"One of the most important things for dealers to know about today's hitches is if the hitch includes sway control or if it is an additionally required option," says Blue Ox's Johnson. "Sway controls are an important part of the weight distribution system. Trailer sway can be caused by improper loading, crosswinds or inadequate spring bar tension."

There are three general types of sway controls, according to Johnson:

- "Independent friction controls are the original method of sway control. Friction controls are a steel bar with one side attached to the trailer and the other to the weight distribution head. Depending on the trailer weight, one (less than 6,000lbs) or two (6,000-10,000lbs) controls may be needed.

- "Dependent sway controls are built into the weight distribution systems themselves.

The downward force of the spring bar is utilized to apply resistance to chain bracket assemblies thus reducing trailer sway. Dependent sway controls are the only type of sway control approved for trailers with surge brakes and are generally easier to hook up than independent friction controls.

- "Active sway controls force the vehicle and trailer to ride in a straight line by resisting the start of sway through a mechanism such as a dual cam."

Sway control is a good upselling opportunity and a major safety feature, but it's also an important way to reduce shop liability. If a hitch or trailer manual recommends sway control and you don't at least offer it to your customer, you could be found liable if anything happens.

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EDUCATING CUSTOMERS

“The propensity to overload the trailer to exceed the vehicle’s towing capacity has never been greater,” says Gage. “Offering a hitch designed to handle significantly greater tongue weight and flex generated by the weight of the object either being carried or towed is critical for long-term satisfaction and safety”.

Says McKissick: “Each hitch is assigned both a weight carrying capacity (WC) and a vertical load capacity, also known as tongue weight (TW). Certain hitches [also have] a weight distribution capacity (WD) which refers to the towing capacity if a weight distribution system is used.”

Johnson adds that “capacity is very important for the dealer. They need to ensure that all components of the hookup meet the necessary rating. A hitch system is only as strong as the weakest link. So while the weight distribution hitch may be rated at up to 1,500 lbs. tongue weight, if the ball hitch or truck’s towing capacity does not meet the capacity of the hitch itself, the additional rating is essentially worthless.”

For any vehicle, its installing dealer needs to know the vehicle make, year and model as well as understand its towing capacity, says Tiger. “The dealer should also fully [determine] the customer’s intended use (what he wants to tow) and be prepared to offer counsel on whether or not the customer’s vision aligns with what his vehicle is capable of.”

For example, say a customer has a full-size pickup that is rated for 7,500 lbs. gross trailer weight (GTW), says Tiger. This can be determined by looking at the customer’s truck model, trim level and options such as engine, suspension package, etc. This information is required to select the right hitch. But it’s also imperative to know the trailer type and intended use to select the right accessory equipment like ball mount, pintle hook, weight distribution equipment, brake control, wiring harness, connector style and such.

“Capacity,” notes McKissick, “is the primary factor to consider when choosing a hitch. However, there are other nuances to consider, as well. For example, a no-drill hitch will be easier to install. There may also be options that are visible and hidden beneath the bumper. Many consumers will happily pay more for the hidden version. Some also prefer the look of a round-tube main body to a square tube.”

Teaching end users to hook up their trailer or hitch-mounted accessory also should be a mandatory step in the sales/installation process, says McKissick. “It is a good practice for dealers and installers to run through this with their customers after installing a hitch. Towing systems should be properly coupled and pinned into place. Safety chains or cables should be used ... and they should cross, forming an “X” under the coupler. Trailer balls should be properly torqued onto the ball mount. The end user

should also ensure that the lighting is functioning properly and that the trailer wheel bearings are properly greased before heading out onto the road.”

EDUCATING YOURSELF AS A DEALER

Beyond learning all the features and specifications of the towing equipment you sell, dealers should educate themselves about the manufacturers they are choosing to work with, reminds Tiger. He suggests asking: “Who are they? Have they ‘been in the game’ a while and, therefore, know how to ‘play’? Do they protect their dealers, for example, from predatory pricing practices — like using MAP [minimum advertised price] pricing and enforcing it? Will they stand behind their products with a full warranty? These are all valid questions that deserve valid answers when dealers are considering manufacturers and vendor distributors.”

A dealer needs to be able trust a manufacturer’s credibility and product support so they are comfortable conveying that to their customers. “Otherwise, why stock and sell the products? A solid warranty and superior customer service ... go a long way in conveying confidence to consumers. Superior technology and state-of-the-art manufacturing also combine to give dealers a lot to talk about when selling to retail consumers,” says Tiger.

TAKE CARE IN THE INSTALLATION PROCESS

During the installation process, it’s very important to follow, check and double-check your installation against the installation manual. This isn’t just about customer satisfaction, but also about safety and shop liability. The following are a few quick tips, but none should be a substitute for carefully following manufacturer instructions and recommendations:

- Carefully read the installation instructions and pay attention to the torque specifications. Be sure all bolts and the trailer ball are properly torqued, says McKissick.

- “It’s common, especially in shops that do not perform trailer work and/or have limited room, to neglect the trailer when installing a towing package,” says Tiger.

- The best results are often when an installer can physically assess the trailer and

actually connect it to the tow vehicle when selling and installing a hitch package. The result is a much safer and more manageable package. It can also help you “upsell” the consumer to necessary aftermarket towing aids, such as beefed-up suspension, braking and electrical components, add-on power components to boost towing power and torque, and even other unrelated truck and trailer accessories — not to mention the possibility of trailer repair and upgrade work, says Tiger.

- “Shops and installers should always verify the height of the ball in relation to the trailer frame for appropriate clearance,” says Johnson. “Also, appropriate clearance for the latch mechanism of the hitch in the event that propane bottles or battery packs interfere with the latch — a rotating style rather than a flip type latch — is necessary.”

IN-STORE SALES TOOLS

“Displaying the hitch itself and allowing the customer to operate it offers a hands-on example of the ease with which the customer will be able to hook up and disconnect,” says Johnson. “This is not some-

thing that can be ascertained from looking at a glossy photo in a piece of literature.”

Tiger agrees. “In-store displays are much more effective when they feature actual vehicles and/or trailers. For example, use of a truck or SUV/CUV to show off towing components and showing the vehicle actually ‘in use’ with trailer connected, is very effective in revealing to consumers all they can see to outfit their vehicle.”

Adds Gage: “Given that hitches are often a need-generated purchase, the first and best technique is to have a competent installer available to explain the feature/benefits of a hitch that is being considered. This allows you to best match the right product to the customer’s need.” For example, a vehicle may have hitches available in different receiver tube sizes and weight capacities, Gage says. Using literature or a poster, a good installer can explain why a customer who wants to pull a trailer as opposed to, say, carrying a bike rack, might want to be sure to buy the larger hitch and not be price focused.

Most hitch point-of-purchase displays

A good hitch display gives customers and retailer a good starting point to discuss which hitch type is best for their vehicle and towing needs. Photo from Cequent Group.



tend to be geared to walk-in customers and do not go into nearly enough depth, continues Gage. There is much more to be considered during a hitch purchase than will fit on a simple wall poster. Items like electrical trailer converter/connectors, ball mounts, hitch balls, security devices and more are often overlooked at the point of sale and are important to a successful towing experience.

“The hitch is only the beginning,” says Tiger. It’s most effective to display as many accessories as possible. These include security (locking) products; cargo control (straps and other securing items); lighting



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options; fishing add-ons like surf rod/cooler racks; camping/outdoors products such as canoe and ski/snowboard carriers; trailer parts and accessories (jacks, emergency kits, spare tires and carriers, etc.); and work truck products like ladder and tool racks. You might also consider promoting "fun" accessories such as tailgating accessories (outdoor grills and picnic tables) and custom hitch covers.

In tight retail spaces, McKissick suggests a dealer consider alternatives like his com-

pany's overhead hitch display brackets to display a receiver hitch above their towing pegboard display.

"The best way to tell the consumer that you are in the hitch and towing business is to set up a towing pegboard display," says McKissick. This helps merchandise popular towing products and add-ons. Some manufacturers offer graphic header cards to promote backroom towing products. Curt, for instance, offers custom plan-o-gram design services.

PARTNERING WITH TRUCK DEALERSHIPS

Becoming the "installer of choice" for a truck dealer takes work, but can be worth it.

"The best way is the most aggressive way," suggests Tiger. Here are some of his tips:

- Make appointments to speak with the truck dealer sales, parts and service staff. Arrive early with a surprise like donuts and coffee, pens, desk calendars and such.

- Offer sales/service seminars on the benefits of using your towing products and installation services. Be sure to keep these seminars to less than a half hour and stay focused.

- Keep it simple and concise. Create special "dealer fliers" with pre-configured packages to simplify pricing and selection for dealers' sales and service staff. Don't give them manufacturer catalogs (except the parts department). Give first priority to calls from dealers with questions on towing or applications.

- Offer dealers incentives such as discounted pricing, first-in-line service or a rewards program for making you their preferred source or for referring customers to your shop.

Eyes rear! Are you selling backup cameras with those tow systems?

The popularity of backup-camera assists for trailers is continuing to grow, in part as a time saver, and in part as a safety device — especially in the commercial market.

Not everyone feels the need for a backup camera, until something bad happens, says Jeffrey Nihart director of sales with YSN/Zuncin, Elkhart, Ind., citing safety and operator confidence, and the leading reason he feels backup cameras are seeing a sales uptick.

Adds Paul Morlock, sales and marketing manager at Newton, Mass.-based Swift Hitch, "We towed trailers frequently and found that getting in and out of the cab of the truck five, six, seven or more times was a chore and a waste of time." He says his company's wireless camera system was pioneered out of necessity back in 2005.

Swift Hitch's system uses a portable camera and monitor. To use it, the user mounts the wireless camera magnetically to the tailgate, uses the wireless display to quickly and safely back up, and then can remove and store away the camera and monitor. This allows the system to also be used to install snowplows and other attachments on multiple vehicles. Product literature also lists various non-backup uses for contractors, farmers and outdoorsmen.

The Zuncin backup camera system features IR (infrared) emitters and new technology that allows color imaging in the near total dark conditions.

Another reason for the growing popularity of these camera systems is that pricing has dropped and quality has improved considerably in recent years.

"The costs have come down and the equipment is vastly superior," says Nihart. "A good analogy is what we have seen happen with flat-screen televisions."

In addition to giving users "X-ray vision" to seemingly see through vehicle tailgates, newer backup systems also give users other "superpowers" — like night vision.

Switch Hitch has two systems, both of which have a night vision camera that gives visibility of up to 15 ft. in total darkness, says Morlock.

The YSN/Zuncin system also features IR (infrared) emitters and new technology that allows color imaging in the near total dark conditions.

"Running lights alone can provide enough lumens to allow color imaging," says Nihart. "As a military contractor, we have seen studies that show the human brain can process moving color images quicker than black-and-white moving images."



Swift Hitch's system uses a portable wireless camera and monitor; the camera mounts magnetically to the tailgate and uses the wireless display to safely back up. The system can be removed and stored away or also be used to install on, for example, snowplows and other attachments on multiple vehicles.

Both Swift Hitch and the YSN/Zuncin systems are either fully weather resistant or are fitted with weather guards to allow for use in rain or snow.

The YSN/Zuncin system allows for optional video recording for operator safety, training and insurance purposes.

"In this day and age everyone values their time, whether working or doing recreational activities," says Morlock. "Our ... wireless camera system saves you time and is a real frustration reliever when it comes to hitching trailers."

— Phil Sasso



- Keep ample stock in the products your dealers are most likely to order. Never keep a dealer waiting for an installation due to an inventory shortage or scheduling issues.

- Keep in touch. Make follow-up appointments a few times per year. Dealers rotate personnel often, so keeping your service in the forefront of their staffs' minds is a key to success.

"If you haven't already, stop by and introduce yourself to the folks at the local dealerships," says McKissick. "They don't want to recommend someone they don't know and trust to their customers. Once they get to know you and start hearing great things about you from their customers, you will become their installer of choice.

"Build your reputation via word-of-mouth. To take advantage of word-of-mouth advertising you need to give people something to talk about. ... Treat people with respect, be honest, be friendly and offer great products and services at a fair price.

"In addition to treating the customer right, be sure to manage your image," McKissick continues. "Keep your shop, your front room and your storefront clean and organized. Have

Hitch makers also are adding features that make hitches more user-friendly. New hitch systems are lighter, but stronger; and new technologies, like the rotating style latch on the Blue Ox SwayPro that lets users secure and release the tongue bracket with less force, then swings conveniently out of the way when not in use.



Hitch accessories, such as steps that slip into receivers, make for good add-on sales to owners of pickups, SUVs and vans. Photo from Go Rhino! Products.

you staff dress well and have them greet the customer with a smile. Make sure to maintain your image online, as well. The vast majority of shoppers begin their search online these days."

If you don't currently sell hitches, it can be a new profit center for you. But it's not one you want to jump into without a lot of research and training. If you are selling hitches, chances are there may be

hitch and towing accessories you may be overlooking that could be adding to your bottom line.

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