



**BY PHIL SASSO**  
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## How to shop for a new tool truck

You're not just buying a vehicle, you're buying a store on wheels.

**T**he biggest investment you'll make in your tool business is your truck.

Much like buying a house, it's a big decision you'll only make a few times in your lifetime, so you want to get it right. That means taking the time to think through the entire process.

If you're a new dealer, there's a lot of information to process and a lot of decisions to make. If you're a veteran dealer, you probably have a better handle on what you want. But in either case, be sure you take the time to do your homework.

### Your truck called - it wants to retire

How do you know it's time for a new truck? The average dealer gets a new truck every seven to 10 years, but that varies widely by dealer and region. If you've been a tool dealer for a while, your truck will start telling you when it's time to trade it in. If your vehicle meets the criteria below, it might be time to consider an upgrade.

### How often is your truck in the shop?

"When your truck is in the shop, it's not just costing you money to fix, it's costing you sales because the store is closed," says Frank Solofra, Director of Corporate Accounts at LDV, Inc. Lynch Display Vans, or LDV, ([ldvusa.com](http://ldvusa.com)) has been building tool trucks since 1977.

"What's a day or two of downtime costing you?" asks Solofra. Add up the downtime

for the last year. At a certain point, an older vehicle's cost of downtime is more than offset by a new vehicle.

### Is your truck overloaded?

"If your truck can't handle all your inventory, it's time to look for a bigger truck," says Laura Nederbragt, sales manager at Summit Bodyworks ([summit-bodyworks.com](http://summit-bodyworks.com)).

Do you have enough space for everything? If you can't fit one of the newer toolboxes in your truck, then it's time to trade up. You want at least one of every tool in your inventory to be on your truck.

"Selling tools is a type of impulse business," LDV's Solofra says. If a technician doesn't see a tool on a shelf, chances are he won't ask for that tool. He doesn't know what you have on a shelf in your garage. Think: "out of sight, out of mind."

### Is your truck showing its age?

"Look around at the general condition [of your truck]," Summit's Nederbragt says. If it's looking

ragged around the edges and needs more than a spring cleaning, it may be time to update.

"Our customers see a significant sales increase after buying a new truck," Nederbragt says.

The new vehicle affects the dealer's attitude, impresses customers, creates a nicer shopping environment and instills more confidence in your customers about you as a dealer.

You'll draw more customers out to your new truck. It creates curiosity and revives interest. And, you'll find a lot of technicians that are not yet customers coming out to see your new truck and all your "new inventory."

### You're not just buying a truck ...

Your first decision will likely be which chassis manufacturer to choose, quickly followed by whether you want a step van or cab chassis.

"When thinking about a chassis, you want to be sure there is an OEM service location near you to cover any warranty work," Nederbragt says.



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“Don’t buy Freightliner if the nearest Freightliner dealer is two hours away from you,” LDV’s Solofra adds.

If you call on a shop that does OEM work it may be in your best interest to buy the brand they service. After all, loyalty is a two-way street.

Choosing between a step van and chassis cab can be dictated by your situation.

“Think about where you will park,” Summit’s Nederbragt says.

Are there regulations about parking a truck at your home? Is there a steep incline that will scrape the cab? Or will you need a different place to park your truck? Is your route a wide open rural or tight urban area? These considerations should all come into play in your decision.

### **Weigh the pros and cons**

“A step van will be lower cost,” LDV’s Solofra says. It will also have a shorter wheelbase, which means a tighter turning radius. And, it will be closer to the ground so it will be easier to get in and out. The downside is you lose a lot of space in the cab.

On the other hand, a cab chassis is taller and has more of a truck esthetic, Solofra says. The separate cab has benefits like private driver space and a passenger seat. So, you can lock away your inventory when you have your truck serviced. On a step van there is the extra expense of adding a lockable door between your cab and box.

Another consideration is the cost of a solid security system to protect valuable inventory.

“We have alarms on all of our tool trucks,” Summit’s Nederbragt says.

Summit and other tool truck builders also offer built-in security cameras. You might even consider installing a security camera that you can monitor from your smartphone.

### **... You’re buying a store**

The most involved part of buying a tool

truck is planning your store layout and lighting. It’s also the part with the biggest potential return on investment. Involvement in this process should start before you even call the truck fabricator.

“I suggest that [tool] dealers keep a little six-month journal of things you wish your truck did or could do,” LDV’s Solofra says. Knowing how you want to use your space, what works for you and what doesn’t can help you design your perfect truck layout.

Also, I suggest you keep a collection of back issues of *Professional Distributor* so you can refer back to the “Show Me Your Truck” section for truck design and merchandising ideas. Bookmark the page and make notes of what you want to incorporate into your next truck.

But don’t forget to let the experts kick in advice, too. You may not be thinking about something like outlets, but the salesperson/designer sees dozens of trucks a year. They can give you advice on considerations that might otherwise be overlooked.

There are a lot of drawings, redlines and back and forth in the design process, Nederbragt says. Be ready for it. The goal is to be sure that every detail is just right.

### **Tool truck trends**

“Over the last six to eight years we’re seeing a move away from a mobile warehouse with fixed shelves to a mobile retail store,” LDV’s Solofra says.

Dealers are taking tools out of boxes and displaying them on shelves. So, they need more display space and better lighting to highlight products.

“They don’t want the same truck layout day after day after day,” Solofra says.

Tool truck lighting has shifted from fluorescent to brighter, more energy-efficient LED lights which are also more compact and last much longer. (Most LED light installations are carry a three-year or more warranty.)

There are many different warranties on each truck, Solofra says. There’s a

chassis warranty, a transmission warranty and component warranties for lighting, air conditioning and so on. It’s a good idea to keep all your documentation on file.

“We have a craftsmanship warranty on all our builds,” Summit’s Nederbragt says. A good truck builder will help you find the right warranty to fix anything that may go wrong.

When you’re spending between \$125,000 and \$200,000 on a truck, you want to be sure everyone is standing behind their piece of the puzzle. Be sure to ask upfront what’s covered and for how long.

### **Don’t forget the add-ons**

There are a few added features you’ll want to be sure to consider. Whenever I make a major purchase, I always ask if there’s anything I overlooked. I’m usually glad I asked. It’s better to ask upfront than to be sorry later.

Common add-ons include rooftop A/C units, an electric generator (or second generator) and exterior lighting, says Nederbragt. Generators are very popular because decreasing your engine idling time can increase your engine life. Also, some municipalities have rules prohibiting idling, and some OEMs now have an automatic shut-off limiting idling time to 15 minutes.

### **Don’t wait. Act now**

Buying a new truck can be an exciting process, but it can be time consuming.

“[Tool dealers] definitely need to plan ahead and know that it is a process that they cannot rush,” Summit’s Nederbragt says.

Often buildout timelines depend on the chassis chosen. For many tool truck makers, an OEM cab chassis can have a three to five month wait, plus three to four months for the build. Step vans can take nine or 12 months after plans are approved, Nederbragt says.

Thinking about your next truck? You might want to start planning today. 📞