

CSA: Why the Scores are Important



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Times are changing in the motor carrier industry. Today, shippers need to pick the safest carriers and manage their own risks to drive down costs over the long term.

The Compliance Safety Accountability (CSA) was created by the Federal Motor Carrier Safety Administration (FMCSA) to improve heavy truck and bus safety by targeting unsafe truck fleets. Designed to make highways safer, CSA was rolled out in 2010 and is a proactive, data-driven, performance-based, national safety initiative with cumulative effects that are transforming the way carriers, shippers, and enforcement personnel approach heavy truck highway safety.

CSA aims to weed out as many as 5 percent—or 150,000—of the nation’s 3 million or so long-haul truck drivers that the government believes are involved in a disproportionately high number of truck accidents and fatalities.

CSA uses seven Behavior Analysis and Safety Improvement Categories, known as “BASICS.” These seven BASICS are designed to identify specific driver and carrier safety performance issues. They include: unsafe driving; hours-of-service; driver fitness; controlled substances and alcohol abuse; vehicle maintenance; hazardous materials cargo; and crash history.

All roadside violations are counted against driver and carrier safety performance ratings, and violations are ranked based on severity ratings, with higher point values assigned to safety violations deemed to increase the probability of highway accidents. Point values are rated from 0 to 100.

All carrier scores, with the exception of hazmat and crash history, are available to the public on the FMCSA web site, at <https://csa.fmcsa.dot.gov>. The lower the number, the safer the fleet, and any score above 65 warrants a “warning letter” from the government. A score above 65 means that 35 percent of carriers in their class have worse scores. For hazmat carriers, the cutoff score is 60.

Impact on shippers

CSA is becoming a game-changer for shippers. Because most of the CSA scores are public and available on the web, there’s no longer any excuse for shippers to choose an unsafe carrier.

The consequences for shippers that choose an unsafe carrier can be severe due to the fact that CSA scores are also available to trial lawyers. Shippers may easily face increased financial and legal liability if those lawyers can show a pattern of shippers moving freight with unsafe



carriers. Those same liabilities could occur even if a shipper chooses a third-party logistics provider (3PL) that happens to select a safety deficient carrier.

Some carriers only need to have \$750,000 in insurance. For hazmat carriers, that minimum rises to \$5 million.

“Shippers should be very, very compelled to evaluate carriers on their CSA scores,” says Rob Abbott, vice president of safety policy at the American Trucking Associations (ATA). “Others might be less sophisticated because they don’t understand what CSA means. They *have* to know they *have* to use them because the vicarious liability risk is just too great not to be prudent.”

If a carrier only has minimum insurance, shippers could easily be brought into lawsuit and be held liable. So the question for shippers is: Why choose a low-cost carrier rather than a safe carrier? The only correct answer is: Don’t.

Experts and trucking officials agree that it’s just good business sense to move freight with a safe carrier: Delays are avoided and new higher fines are in place. Shippers are now being held to higher standards to ensure that they’re in compliance with the new cargo securement and hazardous materials regulations.

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Jeff Mercadante, vice president of safety at Pitt Ohio, says shippers are becoming smarter and are making sure that they move freight with a safe carrier. “When CSA came out, they took it to another level,” Mercadante says.

If a lawyer is able to show a pattern of a shipper selecting unsafe carriers, it’s not unreasonable to expect that a jury could rule that a shipper was complicit in this accident. With bad carrier CSA scores available to all at a click of a mouse, it behooves shippers to know their risks in selecting a carrier solely on being the least expensive or the most convenient.

If, on the other hand, a shipper has a well-documented process for selecting carriers and can show that he sticks with it through periodically checking CSA scores and has an predisposition to selecting carriers with the best safety records, that shows an ability to insulate the shipper and the company.

Thanks to CSA, it’s never been easier to accurately track a trucking company’s safety record. Trucking customers should be aware of the easy availability of those scores and have a process in place for selecting only those carriers with the best CSA scores.

Bottom line: Failure to select safe carriers is taking a big risk.

Impact on carriers

Almost without exception, safe carriers say that they like CSA and applaud its intentions, adding that it keeps safer fleets on the highway.

“At a high level, CSA’s objectives are certainly laudable,” says ATA’s Abbott. “I have to think that a vast majority of stakeholders would say CSA has had a positive impact on carriers in terms of devoting resources and attention to safety-based initiatives.”

Safe operators, such as Pitt Ohio, have always had a robust training program and have consistently used 100 percent compliant drivers. CSA has also caused carriers to stay current with all regulations, which have been flowing out of Washington at a rapid pace over the last decade or so.

“We’re always out in front because we’re always striving to improve policies and processes,” Mercadante adds.

When the new CSA protocol was rolled out in 2010, Pitt Ohio took many proactive steps by initiating training with its drivers and vehicle maintenance personnel the year before. Because of that training and its deeply ingrained culture of safety, Pitt Ohio has enjoyed an excellent safety rating under CSA with low accident frequencies and outstanding safety procedures. These include:

- Electronic software for real-time tracking of driver performance.
- Equipment monitoring with alerts sent directly to Pitt Ohio’s safety department.
- Customized safety databases to capture events in all operational areas.
- Vehicle maintenance program that exceeds regulatory requirements.
- Electronic logs for accurate recording of drivers’ hours-of-service.
- Equipment designed with load securement options and e-tracking.
- Modern equipment domiciled at one location.
- Employee development and advancement programs.
- Continual employee training, monthly safety meetings, and regulatory updates.

All this hard work has paid off. More than 40 percent of Pitt Ohio’s drivers have exceeded its 1 million mile driver achievement program in their careers.

What can shippers do?

Shippers can help ensure timely, uninterrupted delivery of their freight through some simple steps that most of your competitors are probably already doing:

Be aware of time constraints and try to get the driver on and off your dock as fast as possible. Remember, every minute on the dock translates into less time to get to a destination.



Make sure paperwork is in proper order—especially hazmat. Make sure labeling is correct and all freight is packaged properly. That also includes heavy machinery that is properly crated. Make sure hazmat is in proper containers, with tight-fitting lids. Do not reuse drums not designed for certain chemicals.

Make a commitment to secure all freight properly to prevent a cargo securement violation. Under CSA’s scoring system, unsecured freight is a major 10-point violation. Load the product correctly so that it doesn’t shift in transit.

Accurately calculate the shipping weight to prevent overloading trailer. Properly complete



all hazmat bills of lading and properly placard the trailer.

If possible, give drivers flexibility in their pickup and delivery times. Because of the government's recent tinkering with drivers' hours-of-service, every wasted minute literally is money. If a driver is forced to wait around at your dock, those minutes could prove costly later in the day.

Allow drivers to inspect the load. Give the driver the chance to eyeball trailers for securement. Some shippers

may not want drivers on their dock, but such restrictions are not fair to the driver. Give drivers the chance to inspect what he or she expects to haul.

Times are changing in the motor carrier industry, and capacity is tightening. Shippers that insist on rigid pick-up and delivery schedules, or those with sloppy loading practices and habits, might be unwittingly driving up their own costs through higher trucking rates.

When push comes to shove in regards to available truck capacity, those sloppy shippers can be the ones pushed to the end of the line when it comes to appointments. It not only behooves shippers to pick the safest carriers, but it's up to them to manage their own risks and create best practices to drive costs down over the long term.

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