

THE BUSINESS NEWS

Serving Brown, Calumet, Door, Kewaunee, Manitowoc, Marinette, Oconto, Outagamie, Shawano & Winnebago counties

February 1, 2010

www.thebusinessnews.com

Vol. 7, No. 20 \$1.00

Simulator drives growth

Crossroads provides driver training for variety of industries

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When Jim Van Den Elzen started his business, he envisioned helping smaller companies with their driver training. Today, his company, Crossroads Safety Management Group, is doing that and so much more.

Crossroads utilizes the latest technology to provide simulator training for a wide variety of industries. The company monitors drivers' habits through the use of simulators and quarterly testing, and has designed a program that will benefit small- to large-fleet companies. The company trains drivers for truck fleets, emergency vehicles, school buses, motor coaches, military vehicles, public utilities, waste hauling, fire and rescue, law enforcement, and snowplowing.

Although simulator technology has been around for about 7 or 8 years, Van Den Elzen said his company is the only one that does mobile simulator training in the United States.

"We bring the technology of simulation right to our customer's doorstep," he said. "It is a very cost-effective way to train drivers."

He said companies already using this program have reduced accidents per mile, decreased driver turnover, increased fuel mileage by 15-percent, and have a tool to help reduce their insurance premiums.

Although he started the business in Green Bay, Van Den Elzen said they now travel throughout Wisconsin and the Midwest, to North and South Dakota, Minnesota, Iowa, Illinois, Ohio, and Lower Michigan.

Van Den Elzen said his customer base has grown to include not only some national contracts but also a Canadian company where he will provide pre-employment testing and driver training to their clients in the United States. He is looking at ways to expand and partner with other companies across the country.

Van Den Elzen started the business 2-1/2 years ago. He has about 20 years of experience as an over-the-road truck driver. After that, he obtained a degree in electronics at NWTC and later went on to work in the insurance industry for 10 years.

"I saw a need for a training program, a return-to-work and a safety program for drivers," he said. "Many people I talked with wanted a training program, but most could not



Jim Van Den Elzen of Crossroads Safety in Green Bay helps companies train their drivers by simulating things such as snow, rain, bad drivers and deer. The company also has a mobile simulator that can provide training anywhere in the United States. The Business News photo by Matt Becker

afford it, except for the very large companies. I did some research and found a simulator from the same company that does all the training for commercial and private airlines. I decided to start a business where I could help smaller companies and provide the training, and they could pay by the hour. I saw the opportunity for a successful business," Van Den Elzen said.

He said he partnered with NWTC and trained drivers in the public safety, gas utility and electrical program there for about a year.

"Most people wanted the training delivered to their door," he said. "It cost them too much to bring in 20 or 30 drivers into the school. So, that's when I bought the mobile unit and started going out to train with County Rescue for ambulance training, emergency vehicles, first responders, and also fire departments. It turned out to be really good."

He said the technology allows for highly-specialized training geared to a particular industry and driving conditions.

"We sit down and we talk with the poten-

tial client and then we put a scenario together for all the issues they want to address, whether it's backing issues, speed, or space management," Van Den Elzen said. "We can add into the program so the driver has to encounter all those special conditions. We can put in any kind of weather, from wind, rain, ice or snow."

The simulator can duplicate any size, weight and manufacture of a vehicle that is normally driven. It also provides industry-specific vehicles, such as fire trucks, garbage trucks, ambulances, as well as tractor-trailer units. The system can also simulate tire blow-outs, brake failure, accelerator failures, brake lock-up, and engine overheating.

"From a pre-trip inspection to improper shifting techniques, the program allows us to set parameters so a driver feels like he is driving his own truck during the test," he said.

When quarterly testing is complete, the program allows Crossroads to reproduce the data, store it and share the information with the safety manager, owner or person in charge.

"Everybody has different issues they

want to address," he said. "For example, we work with a coach company that had a lot of problems with their buses hitting things in big cities. So, we ran the coach drivers through a series of tight corners, where they had to maneuver. We can design in any hazards that we want to."

In another example, he said they are working with a major food company and have implemented a fuel management program.

"We handpicked 12 drivers, and after the training, 8 out of the 12 were able to improve their fuel mileage — some as high as 40-percent," Van Den Elzen said.

Research has shown that one-hour of simulation equals four hours of behind the wheel training.

Beyond safety and efficiency of simulator training, Van Den Elzen said he recently discovered another advantage. "A tech school group in Florida called us because they are looking at using this type of training to reduce their carbon footprint," he said. "That was a new idea that I hadn't thought of before."

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