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Keeping Trucks Full, Coming and Going



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By KEN BELSON, THE NEW YORK TIMES

It's an age-old problem that has vexed truckers and shippers for as long as there have been truckers and shippers: how to find cargo for their return trip home after they've made their initial delivery. Now truckers are trying to address it in a systematic way.

Deadhead trips, as they are known, are a waste of fuel, money and time, and a producer of greenhouse gases. Yet more than a quarter of the trucks on the road in the United States drive empty, according to industry estimates.

Some of the country's largest retailers, manufacturers and trucking companies are working on a solution, sharing information about their trucking routes in hopes of matching empty trucks with goods that need to be shipped.

Known as [Empty Miles](#), the program is the brainchild of the Voluntary Interindustry Commerce Solutions Association, or VICS, a nonprofit group that tries to make the supply chain in consumer goods industries more efficient.

For decades, companies have tried to eliminate empty truck miles in an ad hoc fashion. One company would hear about another company that shipped along the same route. One manager would call his counterpart and work out a deal. Then, about two years ago, VICS members representing a swath of corporate America bore

down on the problem. Diesel fuel was near record highs; the economy was slowing. Running empty trucks was more and more the difference between profits and losses; running fewer trucks was a way to reduce emissions and help meet corporate sustainability goals.

"The economy is demanding that these trucks run with things in them," said Joe Andraski, the president and chief executive of VICS, which is based in Lawrenceville, N.J.

VICS worked with GS1 US, the standards group that developed the bar code, to create a portal where shippers including [Macy's](#), [J. C. Penney](#) and Levi Strauss, and two dozen trucking companies can list their empty truck routes.

Two big hurdles remain. Companies often resist taking part in new programs if it involves adopting new technology. Luckily, the cost of gaining access to the Empty Miles Web site that VICS and GS1 US created is just \$1,600 a year.

The bigger challenge is that many companies are reluctant to share their shipping routes for fear of divulging trade secrets to rivals.

To address this fear, VICS recruited large, prominent companies like Macy's to jump in so others would feel comfortable participating. Company names are also hidden on the Web site so that shipping managers are not bombarded

with cold calls from trucking companies looking for business. The company names are only divulged after matches are made.

So far, 42 companies have joined the program, about half shippers and the rest trucking companies. Companies list what equipment they have, what days each week they ship their goods and so on. For now, the service is largely containers filled with dry goods, though tankers and flat bed trucks may be added later.

The subscriber-only Web site is relatively easy to use. Shipping managers list their empty routes or the cargo they would like to ship. When other managers find a potential match, they begin talking off-line on how to structure a deal.

One shipper, for instance, might ship on Monday, Wednesday and Friday. Another may ship on Thursdays, not Fridays. One company may change its shipping schedule to make the deal work.

Typically, shippers like [Macy's](#) pay trucking companies for a round trip even if cargo goes in only one direction. Round trips are more expensive than one-way trips, so if a second shipper pays to have his cargo sent back on the return trip, both shippers save.

For example, shippers might be charged \$2.40 a mile for a round trip. If another company is found for the return trip, each company would pay \$1.20 a mile. That would be cheaper than paying for a hypothetical one-way rate of, say, \$1.60 a mile.

The trucking company would fill a truck that would have been driven empty.

Macy's has seen immediate savings. The company posts more than 328 routes — lanes, in industry argot — on the Empty Miles site. So far, Macy's has found other shippers for 70 of its empty truck routes. Each empty route used by another shipper is expected to save Macy's about \$25,000 a year, said Bill Connell, the company's

senior vice president for transportation, reverse logistics and collaboration.

Steve Matheys, the chief administration officer at [Schneider National](#), a major trucking company, said that because of the Empty Miles program, it had saved 5,554 gallons of diesel fuel and kept 61.65 tons of carbon dioxide from being emitted.

The breakthrough, Mr. Connell said, was being able to communicate with many shippers and trucking companies at once, rather than just one company at a time.

“It's not hard to get very excited about the potential,” he said.

The challenge will be getting more companies to participate, Mr. Connell and others say. While there are many shippers along the Eastern Seaboard and to the Midwest, it is harder to find matches on longer routes in the Western United States.

Still, the program is young. “The more postings we get, the more opportunities,” said Steve Matheys, the chief administration officer at Schneider National. “It's a function of the numbers.”