If someone asked you who the “face” of your business is, whom would you name? The owner? The head grower? One of your greenhouse workers?

How about your delivery driver? Think about it: he/she is the one that your customers see on a regular basis—sometimes multiple times a week during peak season. Just as you do with the people who grow your plants, you should have high standards when hiring the person who drives the truck.

“The driver is sometimes the ONLY person your stores meet in a year,” said Abe VanWingerden, one of the owners of Metrolina in North Carolina. “[Customers] talk to other people on the phone or email, so a driver might be the only face that the store sees, and thus, that driver represents you.”

So finding good delivery drivers is vital, but also one of the hardest things for a business owner to deal with.

“It truly is a complicated situation of having enough drivers, trucks and carts to maintain the level of service that customers demand and expect,” explained Bobby Barnitz of Bob’s Market in West Virginia, who has customers throughout the East Coast.

**A smaller pool**

As growers have experienced a shortage of willing and able-bodied workers for the greenhouse during the last decade, it’s been the same for delivery drivers. There are three possible reasons why: 1) There are more people attending college and most college graduates gravitate toward other types of jobs; 2) new driving regulations from the U.S. Department of Transportation’s Federal Motor Carrier Safety Administration—like limiting the average work week for drivers because of worry about driver fatigue—have dried up a well of potential employees; and 3) much of the work is seasonal and most people want a full-time position all year round.

Jason Parks of Parks Brothers Greenhouses in Arkansas knows all too well the struggle of finding a good driver.

“The new driving regs make it harder for existing drivers to make the same as they did before the new laws, so companies have to pay more for the drivers or settle for less experienced drivers who will work for less,”
Finding the diamonds
If you're having a hard time finding good drivers, you can try some alternative methods to hiring—and keeping—good employees.

Bobby said that offering part-time options for older drivers has helped, along with job sharing for full-time drivers during the off-season.

“We have always been fortunate to be able to hire some part-time drivers who maybe don't require full-time employment and have retired from another job,” he explained. “This has really been helpful during the peak times of the year for us. [And] we have several full-time drivers whom we can utilize hauling input materials and other items to keep them busy.”

Both Parks Brothers and Metrolina have used a third-party company to provide able drivers, and although that saves you from having to go through the hiring process, it doesn't necessarily mean it's foolproof.

“We supplement our driver needs by using drivers from temp agencies,” said Jason. “Their driver screening should be more comprehensive than ours, but it's still a toss-up on whether or not the driver is any good.”

Most leasing companies follow the guidelines imposed by the Department of Transportation (DOT), including requiring a commercial driver's license (CDL), but as with any employee, sometimes you find they just don't work out.

Jason said that increasing the salary for drivers last spring did help and they were able to get most of the drivers that they needed, but he admitted that if they could find a way to keep them on the payroll all year, it would probably alleviate some of the problems.

Age & attitude
Even if you have high hopes for the person you’ve hired and they’ve proven to be an excellent driver, there are other things to keep in mind. For example, some drivers want to do just one thing—drive—meaning moving the racks off and on the truck is left to someone else. And that can be a problem, too.

“From our experiences, most drivers only want to bump the dock and let someone with a forklift unload while they sit in the truck, then get the paper work signed,” said Jason. “They don’t want to push racks and tailgate them off the truck and pick up the empty ones.”

Many companies have better luck with older drivers who know the drill and aren’t afraid of doing the work. But even though the heart may be willing, the body may not be able.

“We use a lot of older drivers that we hire on our payroll. They are usually the better drivers, but physically, they have a hard time with the racks,” said Jason.

Finding and retaining good delivery drivers can be a tiresome and lengthy process, but you need to have
some sort of program in place to weed out the bad from the good, even if it’s not failsafe. However, if you’re finding that you’re firing more drivers than you’re hiring, you may have to look at either improving your hiring process or finding ways to make the job more appealing. Or both.

Food for Thought When Hiring Drivers

The following was taken from the RSI Insurance Brokers website. RSI Insurance specializes in providing insurance to the transportation industry in 45 states and for more than 100 carriers.

Age National Transportation Safety Administration studies show that commercial truck drivers between the ages of 21 and 23 have the highest incidence of fatal accidents of any age group. Although the Department of Transportation (DOT) only requires a minimum age of 21, it’s recommended that companies look for drivers who are at least 24 years old. There’s no upper age limit set by DOT, but as drivers age, their reflexes, vision and stamina all decline.

Experience DOT doesn’t set a minimum experience requirement. They simply state that the driver must be qualified by reason of experience or training. Many insurance companies and rental truck companies (if you rent your trucks) advise that a driver should have at least three years of verifiable, comparable driving experience. Driver trainees may be considered if they’re at least 23 years old, have graduated from a Professional Truck Drivers Institute approved driver training school and have a good driving record.

Driving record A driver with multiple tickets is extremely difficult to defend in litigation arising from an accident. A maximum of four moving violations in the most recent three-year period is acceptable. Any misdemeanor or felony citations such as DWI/DUI, reckless driving, drag racing, leaving the scene of an accident, etc., should be considered disqualifying offenses.

Accidents The average driver has one accident every five years. If a driver has had two at-fault accidents in the most recent three-year period, there’s an excellent chance that the driver will have more. It’s recommended that a maximum of one at-fault accident be accepted. This same criterion should apply to retaining current drivers. A driver in his first six months of employment is one of the most accident-prone drivers that a company can have. During this time the driver is learning new routes, new customers, new paperwork and new procedures. A company with a high driver turnover rate is usually a company with a high accident rate as well.

Education Although there are many excellent drivers who don’t have a high school diploma, education should be a qualifying factor. A driver should exhibit sufficient literacy to properly complete logs, paperwork, trip reports, etc. A driver without a high school diploma may be excellent behind the wheel, but have difficulty with the rest of the job. A general policy requiring a high school diploma should be set. If a driver can demonstrate adequate competency, this requirement can be waived.

Hiring costs Quite often, companies yield to economic pressures and hire poorly qualified drivers just to fill seats and to get the truck moving. The desperate hope is that the new hire will work out until a better driver is found as a replacement. It’s also hoped that in the meantime, this new driver won’t do too much damage. On the surface, this seems to make sense. What the company hasn’t figured in is the cost of hiring. Recent surveys have placed the cost of hiring a new driver at between $800 to $2,000. This cost can include advertising, phone calls,
physicals, drug tests and the hours required to process, road test and provide orientation to the new hire. Not included in that cost figure is lost revenue from downtime as the truck sits in the yard and the reduced productivity of the driver while learning a new system. If these additional costs are included, the overall cost of finding and hiring a new driver increases dramatically. Hiring a driver that’s not going to work out is a luxury that few companies can afford.

**Maintenance** Thirty percent or more of all maintenance costs can be traced back to equipment abuse. Much of this abuse can be attributed to new drivers who are unfamiliar with the equipment or who are inexperienced and don’t have good driving habits. Hiring poorly qualified drivers will have a direct adverse effect on company maintenance budgets and fuel costs. GT