



S.J. Smith annual driver training results in fewer accidents, safer drivers

S.J. Smith Company trains all drivers annually in national driving standards, DOT regulations and state requirements



(L to R: Zack Kyer, compliance coordinator, and Jason Daniels, driver, S.J. Smith.)

DAVENPORT, Iowa - It's a hot day in July, and Jason Daniels is prepping for a day of driving from S.J. Smith's Urbana, Ill., location. Daniels, who has been driving with S.J. Smith for eight years, is familiar with the safety requirements for driving the truck and delivering cylinders and refrigerated liquid cans. Today, however, he has company. He's driving with Zack Kyer, compliance coordinator at S.J. Smith, for a full day of road testing.

Kyer trains each full-time S.J. Smith driver on road safety between spring and fall each year. "I also road-test all new drivers before they can drive a route truck solo," Kyer says. "I ride with them all day long, I try to ride with them on a day when they have more deliveries, and I try to pick a different route each time so I'm not doing the same route every year."

"The reason we do a little bit longer day is because most drive perfectly for the first few hours while they're being tested, but the afternoon is when they tend to relax," he adds.

Jim Graber, director of safety for S.J. Smith, says the testing goes beyond what's required by state and federal laws and regulations, but also helps the company gather information and make sure drivers are being taken care of. "It helps us identify delivery issues, customer issues, and helps us relay that we care about the drivers. It gives us a feel for how the driver is operating the vehicle and any challenges they might be facing."

In addition, it's reduced accidents, and increased awareness of potential safety hazards.

"I felt there was a need to have everyone review the material each year," said Richelle Smith-Brecht, president and CEO of S.J. Smith Company. "I want our drivers and the public to be as safe as possible, and that's why



we have such a diligent review and training process. Also, I want to make sure they are handling the vehicle well, and that we are flagging difficult deliveries for drivers.”

“We have seen accidents go down, and usually the accidents we have are \$1,000 or less,” Graber adds.

The road test starts out with a pre-trip check of the truck, paperwork and inspection – reviewing last year’s report, checking the license and medical cards, and checking paperwork for the truck, which includes the manifest – information on all the hazardous materials being delivered.

“If you’re stopped by the DOT, that’s what you need to show them” referring to the manifest to be located in the driver door pouch Kyer explains. “We also check the truck registration, hazmat registration, insurance card, any Special Provisions that the driver may use and the IFTA (International Food Tax Agreement) registration.

Once everything checks out, it’s time to load up and head out, ensuring the driver is loading the truck according to best practices, and checking that everything is secure on the truck.

“It’s making sure they are using the cart and that they aren’t lifting cylinders when they shouldn’t,” Kyer says. “Then I just let them drive, and we chat. A lot of it is how they are handling the truck, how they handle traffic and the difficulties that come with driving among the general public. I’m also coaching them on the Smith Driving System.”

The Smith System® for driving is the national standard for Space, Visibility and Time for the driver. Established in 1952 by Harold Smith (no relation), the Smith System is used to train tens of thousands of drivers each year. Among other recommendations, the Smith System recommends a 4- to 7-second minimum following distance, compared to the National Safety Council’s 3-second minimum. In addition, the Smith System recommends looking 15 seconds down the road. “It gives you room to make a decision in an emergency,” Graber explains. “They want you looking 15 seconds down the road so you can see the person broken down on the shoulder before you get close so you have plenty of time to slow down and position the vehicle in the safest lane.”

Kyer agrees. “I watch their eye movement, where they are checking the surroundings, checking mirrors, making sure they are using the safest lane, and getting over for emergency vehicles,” Kyer says. “I will also watch them if they use a fork truck, if they’re wearing a seatbelt for that, and making sure they’re following safety procedures. I watch how they interact with customers too, seeing that they are being professional with customers and the public. If customer questions arise that we can’t answer, we refer them to their local sales representative at S.J. Smith.”

Kyer checks for those and other items, such as ensuring drivers are not using cell phones. “It’s a company policy – absolutely no cell phone use when hauling hazardous materials,” Kyer says.

“Once we get back to the store, I observe them complete a post-trip inspection – check oil, check fluids, check around the truck for leaks and tires, so they know it’s ready to go for the next day. Drivers must fill out a daily vehicle inspection report and file it in our local DOT file per company rules. That’s every time a Commercial Motor Vehicle (CMV) is driven.”

“The annual road test is required by the company. We buy them lunch as a way to say thanks for the ride-along. Once it’s all buttoned up, I fill out the road test report, print one out for them and the branch manager, then discuss areas they need to improve and what they did well. The report goes in their driver file, and it stays there forever.”

In addition to testing drivers, Kyer keeps track of CDL license renewals, medical cards, hazmat endorsements, Motor Vehicle Records, vehicle leases and licensing and vehicle maintenance. Each CMV must pass an annual inspection that is performed by a DOT licensed facility, and that sticker goes on the side of the truck.



“Our trucks are well-kept. This helps keep the drivers happy because the A/C works and the heat works when needed. Even if I see little things, I tell them to get it fixed right away, if they haven’t already scheduled it, but they usually do a great job with this.”

Kyer says the road testing ensures a high level of safety and comfort for the drivers. “The company wants drivers to be safe, they want drivers to have the proper tools to do their job and they want drivers to do it correctly. There are several factors to doing the review every year. Doing the road test annually is meant to emphasize that S.J. Smith cares that our employees are operating a hazmat CMV properly.”

For more information on how you can become a driver for S.J. Smith, or to see our open positions, please [click here](#). For more information on S.J. Smith, [click here](#).

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About S.J. Smith

Since 1950, S.J. Smith has evolved into a dynamic company, using the latest technology to find cutting-edge solutions for customers and provide quality products in a prompt and professional manner. In addition to being a primary provider of cylinder and specialty gas options, including industrial, medical, micro-bulk and laser-assist systems, and cryogenic and technical services, S.J. Smith also provides welding equipment, protective gear and accessories for specific needs such as ITB or MIG welding, arc gouging, plasma cutting and more.

Founded by Sylvester “S.J.” and Helen Smith, and expanded by their son Richard Smith, who joined the company in 1969, the company is now led by the third generation: Richelle Smith-Brecht, president and CEO; Eric Smith, director of operations and Christopher Smith, assistant pricing manager/expediter. S.J. Smith has 12 locations in Iowa, Illinois and Missouri which provide individualized service to customers large and small, based on the company values of honesty and integrity, customer-driven excellence, flexibility and safety.

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