Match Lift Trucks to Your Operation and Operators

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Application and operators: These are the two things that should drive the decision of purchasing a lift truck, not acquisition cost. You need to know how well potential trucks are designed for your application. And you need to know how well they're designed for operator confidence, productivity and safety. With the appropriate truck in the hands of a confident operator, productivity is optimized. And when that machine is built to last, you get the winning combination of high productivity, safety and low total cost of ownership.

Evaluate your material handling needs

There are many trucks on the market today, and many with specialized functions. For dock work, pallet trucks may be an affordable solution, but they have no stacking capabilities. You can use a sit-down counterbalanced truck for loading or unloading trailers, but these can't work in narrow aisles. Narrow-aisle reach trucks serve that purpose, but they can't load or unload trailers. Then there are trucks that are designed for multiple applications, able to move from the tight trailer to narrow aisle with ease. And there are even trucks with triple-length forks to match your pallet-handling needs.

Finding the right one for you depends on how well you identify your specific needs. Determine the exact tasks you're asking your operators – and their trucks – to perform. Do they need to get on and off the truck frequently? Then you'll want to look at stand-up design trucks with lower step heights. Have narrow aisles? Study reach-height capabilities, understanding that for operators to effectively handle loads at heights they have to trust their truck. Need to go in and out of freezers? The cold environment and slick floors can be particularly challenging for lift trucks. Look for models that have a substantial freezer and corrosion protective package designed for those conditions.

Once you've arrived at the type of trucks you need, weigh individual features between competing models. Shipping docks are an incredibly demanding environment. You'll need a strong drive unit that integrates top and bottom mounting, large spur gears and drive-tire support on both sides. Be sure your truck of choice has been designed to withstand the demands of racing across dock plates and uneven floors. When comparing, take the cover off and look closely at the components. You'll see a difference with lighter duty models. These are machines that will spend an inordinate amount of downtime being repaired and maintained.

Make sure that key components like wear plates are constructed from durable materials such as T1 steel. Also look for steel surrounding critical parts, such as motors, hydraulics and electronics. Load wheel replacement can add up to 50% of

the total maintenance costs over the life of a pallet truck. Your truck's design should integrate all critical components such as compounds, hubs, bearings and axles along with providing optimum load wheel configurations.

While the undercarriage takes its share of abuse in dock applications, the handles of power pallet trucks can also take a pounding when negotiating the cramped spaces of a trailer. To avoid continuous maintenance headaches, look for handles that offer a solid structural design and a robust yoke designed for trailer work. Some walkie pallet lift trucks enable handle operation even in a near vertical position – creating the tight turning radius essential for maneuvering in a crowded trailer. Ask about impact testing results that prove how well the handle holds up under the constant barrage of banging against trailer walls and pallet loads, and how well the ergonomic design protects the operator's hands.

Match man and machine

The best trucks are those designed with the operator in mind. Look for advanced ergonomics like the ability to sit, lean or stand in counterbalanced and narrow-aisle reach trucks. Handles should be multi-functional yet intuitive and simple to operate. You'll also find trucks with infinitely variable handle positioning so operators of any height can find a comfortable handle position. And there are trucks that offer integrated kneepads and floor mats to reduce vibration discomfort and back pain. When operators can remain comfortable throughout their shifts, their productivity will be enhanced.

Also, issues like visibility and safety are paramount to operators. In many applications, pallet trucks handle heavy, off-centered loads. Trucks are now available that feature dual-lift cylinders and a torsion bar for stability and strength. New features like ramp hold can prevent a pallet truck from rolling backwards when the brakes are released on an incline. There are also power-boost features to provide extra power to go up an incline or overcome an obstruction.

Visibility is also a primary issue. Look for trucks that offer side-stance designs or elevated platforms. The better operators can see what they're doing and where they're going, the more quickly they can work, and the less likely they are to have an accident.

The bottom line for lift truck selection is to seek durable trucks that both meet specific operational needs and instill operator confidence and comfort. Enhanced performance and productivity will follow.
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