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## Innovators

### Reaching out early

By Avery Vise

In the spring of 2007, the diesel technician program at the San Bernardino Valley College in California was struggling. The curriculum was solid, but there was a big problem.

“They couldn’t find anyone to come to class,” says Mike Siebert, director of maintenance for Apex Bulk Commodities, an Adelanto, Calif.-based bulk hauler. The diesel tech program offered 14 classes, but there were only four or five students in each class rather than the 25 students each class could accommodate, says Siebert, who serves on the diesel tech program’s advisory committee along with representatives of other local companies that have a vested interest in a steady supply of skilled mechanics.



**Apex Bulk Commodities  
Adelanto, Calif.**  
Worked to bolster its supply of technicians and drivers by helping to market transportation as a career to local high school students.

San Bernardino Valley College traditionally had targeted high school seniors. With a little research and talking to principals and guidance counselors, Siebert realized that this was the fatal flaw. In San Bernardino County, about 70 percent of high school students drop out before their senior year. In other words, San Bernardino Valley College’s efforts to recruit high school seniors essentially missed more than two-thirds of the potential market and focused on the students who were least likely to choose a near-term vocational career over a college education.

San Bernardino County wasn’t alone. The Santa Ana school district in neighboring Orange County suffered from an average dropout rate of 60 percent even though some schools in the more affluent areas of the district had dropout rates in the single digits.

Siebert researched wages in the area and found that the starting salary for a person with a bachelor’s degree averages \$43,000 a year in Orange County and \$40,000 in San Bernardino County. Meanwhile, a truck driver in the area could pull down \$50,000 a year, while a diesel technician could earn \$40,000 to \$100,000. “I have truck washers working for me making \$15 an hour,” Siebert says.

The members of the college’s diesel tech advisory committee also are the members of a broader organization known as the Inland Empire Transportation Council, which is chaired by Dalton Trucking President Terry Klenske. (CCJ recognized Dalton Trucking as an Innovator in December 2005.) As the council delved into the problems that both local transportation companies and vocational education programs were having finding qualified applicants, it developed the idea of staging a transportation

and logistics summit to bring together students, high school administrators, guidance counselors and potential employers. A broad effort made sense as students who had no interest in becoming diesel technicians might find truck driving or railroad dispatching appealing.

The council quickly saw the potential for such a summit, but there was the small matter of paying for it. Siebert personally took charge of the fund raising, contacting some of Apex's current vendors as well as others he had come to know over the years.

"I called up every one of the sponsors, and told them what we were trying to do," Siebert says. He was asking only for \$1,000 each, and some gladly pitched in right away. Others were receptive to the idea, but Siebert was having a tough time converting the general goodwill into actual checks in hand.

### **A big investment return**

That's when Siebert stumbled upon a little-known state program authorized to dole out more than \$100 million a year to companies for employee training. By completing a simple one-page application, companies could receive a virtually automatic \$75,000 to defray employee training costs. Companies with 100 or more employees in California could receive up to \$3,000 per year per employee by completing a slightly more challenging six-page application. Siebert knows of one trucking company that receives \$400,000 a year for training its 500 drivers.

The catch – if you can call it that – is that a company can apply for the employee training funds only after a representative attends a 45-minute workshop on the program. So Siebert arranged for Wally Aguilar, a representative of California's Employment Training Panel, to conduct such a workshop at the transportation summit.

Siebert had his surefire pitch: "You give me \$1,000, and I'll give you \$100 million."

In the end, Siebert locked up about 45 companies and organizations as sponsors and, as a side benefit, helped some of them deal with their own challenges. For example, during his fund-raising efforts, Siebert happened to visit one major employer of diesel technicians on the day of a high-level meeting to discuss how the company was going to fund employee training. A \$1,000 summit sponsorship was an easy thanks for learning about the availability of up to \$3,000 per technician.

The transportation summit drew nearly 600 people. Speakers represented the trucking, railroad and warehousing/distribution industries and included Michael Campbell, head of the California Trucking Association, as well as Apex Logistics Vice President Denny Wyatt and Siebert himself. The Distribution Management Association presented checks totaling \$21,000 to three area community colleges adding to existing endowed scholarships to support students pursuing logistics and transportation careers. Sponsors and organizers brought displays, including 30 new

trucks from sponsor dealerships and classic trucks from members of the American Truck Historical Society. The event also helped raise more than \$12,000 to expand San Bernardino Valley College's diesel technology program.

### **Immediate benefits**

The summit already has led directly to new employees in transportation, Siebert says. For example, one railroad has since opened a classroom at San Bernardino Valley College to train 32 dispatchers. The position requires no advanced education, and even 18-year-olds can apply for the job, which pays \$70,000 a year and full benefits for a job in San Bernardino County.

Perhaps even more important than the summit itself was the publicity and exposure generated by the act of staging it, Siebert says. After the 90-day period during which the summit was being organized, the 14 classes at San Bernardino Valley College were overbooked. Before the effort, high schools students and counselors weren't the only people who didn't realize what the college had to offer in education and training. Neither did the truck dealerships nor the trucking companies, Siebert says.

Many parties worked to make the Inland Empire Transportation Council's summit succeed. Still, the efforts of Siebert and his employer – especially in the financing arena – were key to the program's success. Indeed, San Bernardino County cited Apex's role in the transportation summit in its selection of Apex as employer of the year, Siebert says.

The transportation summit wasn't a one-time event. The Inland Empire council is planning another one next winter at a larger venue that could accommodate twice as many participants or more. And the council is looking to take an even more proactive role by exploring its own commercial driving program.

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Innovators profiles carriers and fleets that have found innovative ways to overcome trucking's challenges.

If you know a carrier that has displayed innovation, contact Avery Vise at [avise@ccjmagazine.com](mailto:avise@ccjmagazine.com) or (800) 633-5953.