AWCI's Construction Dimensions canvassed 18 suppliers around the continent to find out how their boom trucks had been treating them and whether they felt any improvements could still be made. The report card is certainly flying high in the “A” range, with everyone considering their boom trucks invaluable not only for making deliveries but for staying in business.

In a way, boom truck owners have become victims of their own success, as an Arizonan points out: “Contractors have become spoiled by boom trucks in terms of allowing suppliers access to buildings. In the old days, when there were no boom trucks, contractors would leave openings in the buildings so suppliers could make drywall deliveries. Now that boom trucks allow precision delivery in the tightest of spots, the only openings left are the windows. The exception that proves the rule is Southern California, where builders continue to make buildings accessible to other equipment. You don’t see many boom trucks there, but you see plenty of forklifts because they are more productive.”

**FLYING HIGH**

What is it then, that suppliers find most useful about their boom trucks? Speaking for the majority, a Canadian pinpoints “the higher lifting equipment for six-story and higher buildings” (see Chart A, page 28).

“The reach capabilities are vital to our stocking building materials on designated floors on the jobsite,” amplifies a Michigan man, “so our stockers don’t have to run the stairs,” adds a Colorado supplier.

Another twist on the same theme comes from an Arizonan who likes “the way you can pivot the board in any direction you want. It makes it a lot easier to stock when you have to go through windows at a funny angle.”

Three other random preferences include these comments: “outriggers that come out from the side of the truck (instead of the A-frame outriggers) as they can be adjusted and make it easier to set up between buildings” (Ohio); “The hydraulic joystick makes movement easier and reduces chances of hitting anything” (Kentucky); “The trucks we have are all-wheel drive, so we can go wherever we need.” (Florida).

**THINGS HAVE BEEN LOOKING UP**

Users (with one exception who

**BY STEVEN FERRY**

**BOOM OR BUST**

Published by AWCI 27
could see no difference between models 12 years apart) were appreciative of the improvements manufacturers had made in the performance of their boom trucks (see Chart B, page 31).

Speaking again for the majority, the Canadian says, “Reach has certainly improved, as booms were only 35 feet long 15 years ago.”

“Boom trucks are lighter, stronger and faster to maneuver these days,” points out a Massachusetts supplier. “It no longer takes five minutes to move the materials up to the window.”

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“They are more articulating now than they were 15 years ago,” adds the Canadian. “At that time, they were almost a straight mast that would lift up, turn sideways and then extend out. Now you can put them in any position you want.”

On a similar note concerning efficiency of motion, an Arizonan likes the fact that “remote control devices are handy for dealing with high commercial jobs, sometimes limits access. Otherwise, they’re high, wide and handsome.”

The old-timer from Florida recalls that “years ago, the boom would only go half way around, so if the truck wasn’t lined up right, you’d have to swing all the way around the other way. Now they go completely around, the forks and the whole boom rotate.”

“They are a lot more flexible nowadays,” agrees another supplier from Arizona. “Once you reach the spot where you want to be, you don’t have to move off it. The problem is that the 14-foot width of a boom truck, with its outriggers,
because you don’t have walk down the stairs to get back to the truck.”

“The fact that one must have a CDL driver,” meets with the approval of the Kentuckian, because it “means you have a pretty good employee handling the truck which increases longevity of equipment as well as productivity on the site.”

“They are putting more thought into their design,” notes a man who work on booms in Ohio. “As a result, they are becoming more user friendly. Take the grease fitting bank, which they never had before. Also, the outriggers now come with automatic holding valves, which increase safety. Operators are piece workers, so there have been times when they have forgotten to set the manual holding valves, which can get pretty ugly pretty quick.”

“The hydraulics have improved,” observes a Colorado supplier, “so you don’t get the jerkiness, and less damage occurs to the material being delivered.”

“By lightening the materials used in the manufacturing of the booms, they have lightened the truck,” explains the supplier from Michigan. “We have fall and winter Frost Law seasons up here, which limit the amount of weight per axle on a vehicle. This has reduced the product payload, but obviously a lighter crane
now means we can put more product on
the truck."

**SAVING THE DAY EVERY DAY**

When asked whether a boom truck had ever saved the day on the jobsite, almost every supplier responded with almost the same wording. The Kentuckian summed it up with, “Every day, we face jobs that could not be done unless we had a boom truck. If you are in this business, you have to have one. The days of trying to walk up second floors, and a labor force that will do that, have gone. Twenty-five years ago, when I first started in the business, companies used to deliver drywall off a flat bed. Not any more.’

“Seventy-five percent of our business comes to us because we have boom trucks,” echoes the supplier from Massachusetts. Without them, we wouldn’t be in business. And our competitors would get all the jobs. That’s why we have 19 boom trucks.”

“With the longer booms, we are able to stand away from the building itself and avoid real mud holes,” states a New Yorker. “We are often on the job with many other trades trying to work at the same time, whether digging a ditch for laying pipe, or putting down stone. With the long reach, we can avoid those areas.”

“Every jobsite we go to is a challenge. Mud, holes, barriers, booming over the tops of cars, and each time we are happy we had that boom truck,” adds the Michigan supplier.

It isn’t just suppliers who appreciate boom trucks for their back-saving ability to move product into specific and tight spots. As the Michigan man points out,

“**When our boom trucks are at jobsites unloading for our customers, we are often asked by other trades there to lift materials. We’ve done everything from setting air-conditioning units on roof tops to spotting lumber and roofing materials for roofing contractors.**

“The four-wheel-drive trucks are so powerful that they have helped pull other trucks out of the mud, saving on tow bills,” adds the Floridian.

If boom trucks are this popular, is there any room for improvement? “Yes,” say three-quarters of the users.

As the Canadian points out, “There is such a variety in the marketplace, you
can buy just about anything you want.” Most of these desired improvements already exist in some models, and the buyer is left with the usual process of buying the model that provides what he considers valuable. While most requested improvements are generalized perceptions by users, the Ohio man who fixes booms with a passion got down and dirty in terms of specific improvements that could be made. His suggestions will possibly provide the most insight for boom manufacturers.

The highest scorer (three suppliers) was a request for more durable and heat-tolerant hydraulics. “On a hot day, the hydraulic oil overheats and expands beyond the capacity of the tank. We cope by either waiting for it to cool off or putting a cooler on the return line,” advises a supplier from Louisiana.

Apart from two suppliers who wanted to see greater availability of parts for foreign models, the only other request from more than one supplier was to lower the cost of rigs. “They work great but are too damn expensive,” protests a New Yorker. “A new six-story truck and boom goes for $160,000, whereas $100,000 is a more reasonable price.”

There are other issues too. “Maintenance is still a bit difficult, requiring a specialist to fix the hydraulics,” says the Colorado supplier. “If they simplified the flow and reduced the pressure, it would lower repair costs. Also, booms have to be rigid for the weight they haul, but sometimes they are so rigid that the turntables crack under the added stress of operating on the uneven ground of any jobsite. It’s a design flaw.”

“Anything that reduces ruptures in a hose while lifting a load would be beneficial,” says the man from Michigan.

“Sometimes trucks come in with the ladders set up strangely on the carriage where the operator walks around,” notes the Floridian. “They don’t have enough catwalk to walk on, or the ladder is positioned in the wrong place, against the stack.”

“Operators get stiff necks when they are operating at the full reach,” complains the supplier from Massachusetts. “Manufacturers should make seats that tilt back so the operator doesn’t have to bend his head up to see.”
EXCEPT FOR THE BOOM TRUCK’S 14-FOOT WIDTH, WHICH SOMETIMES LIMITS ACCESS, “THEY’RE HIGH, WIDE AND HANDSOME” SAYS A SUPPLIER FROM ARIZONA.

“I’d like to see better education and training for boom truck operators,” says a Vermont supplier. “There is no apprenticeship program from a grass roots level up.”

The Ohio mechanic, who has been fixing boom trucks for years, predictably had several suggestions, summarized as follows:

First, provide an automatic strap to secure the back of the boom during transport. Flipping a switch to activate a clamp would be faster than the minutes it takes drivers to strap down the boom manually. And it would be safer, because “These boys have no problems flipping switches. But finding the load bar and going back and messing with the ratchet strap can be just too much of an extra step for them to do.”

Second, install spiral guards for the wear points on the main hydraulic lines that go up through the main mast. As the boom rotates, the lines rub on the edge. Also, most booms have a small bar welded up in the knuckle between the primary and the secondary, where the pin is, to keep the lines in track. That’s another wear area, as are the bolt heads that fasten the tray for the flex hoses. “A better design is hydraulic tubing that sleeves down to protect the lines. If the rotator lines come with a wear guard on them, it would save companies megabucks. We used to change rotator lines monthly until I began wrapping them in guard. I hardly change them at all now.”

Third, booms that have lines coming out of the rotator at a 45-degree angle are also problematic. “When the boys knuckle in to pick up something close to the headboard on the truck, with the main straight up, and then come in tight with the secondary, it folds the rotator up into those lines and bends the fittings. Booms that have the lines coming out at 90 degrees don’t have that problem.”

Also, he says, “We need better access to grease fittings. One design has a bank of half-a-dozen grease fittings in one spot, with remote fittings. That makes my men more apt to grease and reduces missed fittings. But it would be even better to have an automatic grease system like semi trucks have, a pneumatic greaser on a timer that greases every fitting on the whole truck. It might raise the initial cost, but grease is what saves booms in the long term. I may be rewriting the manual, but it’s better than climbing all over a boom with a grease gun—or forgetting to.”

Finally, he says, “There needs to be the right balance between strength and weight. The lighter the boom, the greater the deflection. Shooting board underneath a porch becomes a problem with light booms as the men remove sheets. The boom rises into the porch, so they have to move back out, lower the boom and move back in. That’s inefficient. The boom can also bounce around so much the operator has trouble getting the board in through the opening.”

In the final analysis, what are boom trucks to the men who use them? “Greatest invention ever,” says the man from Colorado. “Love ‘em,” adds his counterpart from Massachusetts. Given the choice of boom or bust, high-flying suppliers are sticking to their booms.

About the Author
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