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The growing nuisance of graffiti has fleets searching for answers.

by Tom Moore,
executive editor

Graffiti, long the signature of a restless urban population that made its mark on the sides of buildings, subway cars, buses, and telephone booths, has found a new canvas: your trucks.

Trucks and trailers offer a smooth surface, a rolling billboard on which increasingly artistic graffiti artists can take their message on the road.

"To see graffiti on a building, people have to walk by it — so the exposure is limited," says Douglas Moody, director of marketing and technical support for TradeWinds International, which markets a line of graffiti-resistant paints and solvents. "Trucks, especially those with interstate plates, offer increased visibility. To the tagger, it says 'Look what I've done and where I've been.'"

Criminology experts say there is little sinister in tagging, but attribute its rise to youthful exuberance. It's a way to garner attention among one's peers.

Nevertheless, in an industry waging an uphill campaign to add a little luster to a tarnished public image, these unwanted autographs send the wrong signals. "Graffiti is very offensive," says Larry Duff, vp of transportation for Wal-Mart Stores in Bentonville, Ark. "Our image is very important to us."

While not a problem of epic propor-

tions, it is a growing nuisance, particularly in larger urban areas. "For people who run intercity fleets, it's a constant battle to keep units clean," says Laura Dwyer, marketing manager for Du Pont OGM/Fleet Finishes.

"We accept graffiti as the cost of doing business in the bigger cities," agrees an official at one truck rental company. "It's frustrating when people can't show respect for other people's property."

Although statistics are hard to come by, "the problem is getting worse," according to the Graffiti Abatement Institute of North America (GAIN), a nationwide, non-profit clearinghouse for graffiti-related issues. "Up to 15% of graffiti is vehicle-related in some areas."

The ugly reality

Just down the road from GAIN is the Los Angeles regional office of the U.S. Postal Service. There, acting fleet manager Artie Sanders reports his fleet of half-ton white delivery vehicles continues to be tagged. Despite being parked in a secure, fenced-in lot, the units are an attractive canvas for taggers who "simply hop the fence," he says.

Graffiti is also making its mark at Paul's Trucking Corp., a regional food

distributor serving a five-state area around New York City. It is particularly prevalent on those units that are dropped at supermarkets overnight. "These guys are always trying to outdo one another," says Robert Kurzweil, manager of Paul's Trucking.

But graffiti is not just a big-city concern. According to Bill Watson, director of maintenance for B.R. Williams Trucking, Oxford, Ala., "Graffiti is a problem wherever we drop a trailer." But his exposure is at a minimum. Of the company's 240 trailers, only 30 are dropped for loading. The rest remain with the drivers.

Jeff McCormick, director of maintenance for Jevic Transportation in Willingboro, N.J., is getting hit three to four times a year. A veteran of the transit bus industry, McCormick knows graffiti and says today's taggers are getting more aggressive. But despite operations in and around several large metropolitan areas, Jevic keeps its exposure to a minimum. As a pickup and delivery operation, the fleet has limited trailer drops. He's getting hit from what he calls the "run-by" tagger.

Because a dropped trailer presents such an inviting target, Walgreens likes to keep its units on the go, says Tom Stedman, director of corporate transmission for the Deerfield, Ill.-based drug

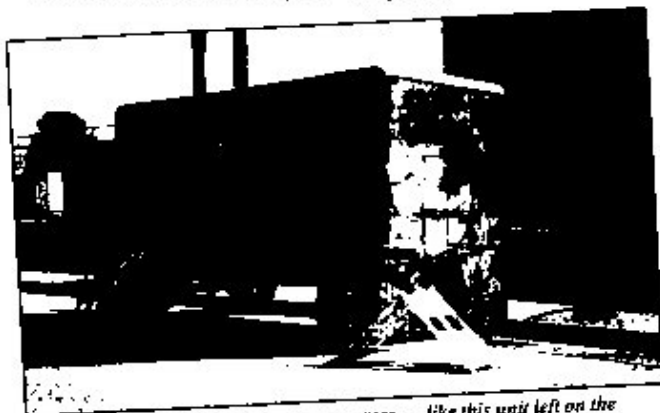
store chain. While graffiti is not a major problem in his operation, when he drops a trailer at a location, "they graffiti the hell out of it."

Wal-Mart typically drops trailers at store locations. Despite heavy exposure that comes with a fleet of 3,400 power units and 20,000 trailers, Larry Duff, vp of transportation for the chain, reports only "isolated" occurrences. He attributes that to the fact that the company requires units to pull up close to the loading docks, generally in well-lit areas, making them less inviting targets.

Some fleets view their own graphics as a deterrent. "All our trucks are paint-

soon enough — usually a couple of weeks — the image can "bite" into certain finishes, particularly acrylic-based, non-catalyzed coatings, according to Steve Podlas, product manager for PPG Industries.

Clean It up Graffiti eradication begins with a thorough inspection. "Graffiti will reappear less often if we check and clean our equipment every day before use," says Gary McAdam, director of Operation Clean Sweep, a Los Angeles Dept. of



Equipment that is parked in non-secure areas — like this unit left on the streets of Los Angeles — becomes a tempting target for today's graffiti artists.

ed a bright red," says Max Day, Unisource's northeastern fleet manager. "My theory is that graffiti artists prefer a white background. Our units don't offer an attractive blackboard for them."

Despite all the precautions, graffiti happens. And when it does, it should be removed as soon as possible.

"Our objective is to clean it up as quickly as possible," says the Postal Service's Sanders. "That way our unit becomes a less inviting target to the next tagger." Sanders keeps a special graffiti remover in bulk at his terminal, which can be applied with a rag and a little elbow grease by maintenance personnel.

Not only does quick response discourage copycat incidents, it attacks the problem before it has a chance to "set." If the problem is not corrected

Public Works initiative formed to fight graffiti in both the private and public sectors. He also serves as president of GAIN. "The key to success is that equipment is checked and cleaned daily — early in the morning, before the taggers get up and out to see their destructive work."

"Certainly if a vehicle comes into the shop for any kind of repair and there is graffiti present, the unit should not go out unless it has been removed," says PPG's Podlas.

Once graffiti appears, fleets have several options. The most widely used method is the "paint over," according to McAdam. Although the cost of this option is attractive, obtaining the proper color match can be a problem. Some fleets even provide drivers with a can of spray paint that matches the equipment, and instruct them to paint

over any graffiti on the spot. Other fleets provide spray cans of graffiti remover to allow drivers to treat the graffiti immediately.

There are fleets that take it a step fur-



Companies are advised to inspect equipment regularly for evidence of graffiti and clean it up immediately to avoid copycat incidents.

ther, however. The Los Angeles Dept. of Public Works, for example, provides a small locked box on each piece of equipment that contains all the essentials for graffiti removal: a chemical remover, a hard bristle scrub brush, rags, and a spray bottle of water, as well as spray paint that closely matches the color of the equipment.

"This works for small amounts of graffiti and for daily maintenance to keep equipment clean," says McAdam. "When faced with large amounts of graffiti, the fleet should call a service contractor to come out after work hours."

The problem with most of these treatments is that although they remove the visible graffiti, they leave behind a reverse shadow image. And some of the cleaning materials will help break down the glue that holds the decals in place.

Depending on the scope of the graffiti, cleanup time runs about two hours. And it never completely disappears because the reverse images show up on the truck.

New paint technology Fast and easy clean-up starts with the right coating. More and more fleets are switching to urethane technology, according to PPG's Podlas. "These higher end-products offer improved durability, plus easier cleanups with

either enamel reducers or lacquer solvents," Podlas continues. "These solvents won't harm a catalyzed product such as polyurethane or clear-coat finish. It may dull the gloss, but you can get that back with a rubbing compound."

McAdam recommends this new polyurethane coating on all new equipment purchases. In addition, he is applying a clear coat to all equipment going into the shop for repairs.

Du Pont has introduced a new polyurethane clear that offers a low surface energy, lower in fact than a Teflon frying pan, says Irving Bell, senior product specialist for Du Pont. That means that items with a higher surface energy (like the spray paint, markers, or shoe polish typically used in graffiti attacks) will bead up and won't "wet out" or adhere to the painted surface.

Another paint technology is KrystalKote, a polyurethane paint developed by J&R Industries for military and aerospace applications, and now being marketed by TradeWinds. The coating includes a polyurethane base compound and a surfactant curing agent that chemically bind together to produce an armor plating that resists graffiti, corrosion, and even the sun's ultraviolet radiation. It can be applied directly over paint and decals.

At Sherwin-Williams, "we are constantly striving to produce fleet coatings that meet the demand of both the highway and legislative environments," says Bruce W. Cowley, market man-

ager, OFF/Fleet Systems. "While no top-coat system can ever be graffiti-proof, premium finish systems are designed to provide maximum performance in abrasion and chemical resistance. These properties help to eliminate or minimize the damage, as well as lower the expense of getting a good-looking vehicle back on the road." ■

A case study: The refuse fleet

Unlike other types of fleets, refuse fleets are prone to taggers because their dumpsters are dropped for long periods in nonsecure areas. Power units are not targeted even so they're kept behind a secure fence, says Paul Seaver, maintenance manager of Waste Management of New Hampshire.

"When we're notified about a tag, we stop the unit out and replace it."

The company then paints the container using a water-based paint that has a high pigment and doesn't require a lot of setup time. Most containers can be painted in about five hours. According to Seaver, another advantage to water-based paint is that it doesn't absorb the graffiti, as does acrylic enamel.

The downside to water-based treatment is that it loses its luster quickly, forcing Seaver to do two paint jobs a year on average to preserve the look. Depending on the location, the paint costs \$11-\$16 a gallon. It takes about a gallon and a half to "dress up" a 22-ft. roll-off container, the biggest unit in Seaver's fleet. Paint is sprayed on to a 6 mil thickness. Paste on four or five corporate logos and warning stickers, and the unit is ready to go.

The incidence of graffiti is actually decreasing in Seaver's operation as local authorities step up their enforcement efforts. Plus, the paint jobs being handed over to the yard are fewer, as one mile charging them for a restoration cost of the new containers.