

Riding. on air

SEATS TODAY ARE MORE COMFORTABLE AND CUSTOM-FITTING THAN EVER.



Bostrom's Wide Ride truck seat

Talk to old-timer truckers and they'll tell stories of driving while sitting on crates, or on seats so hard they felt like metal chairs. Decades ago, even foam cushions were a luxury.

Now, as they become more and more technical and average well above \$500, aftermarket truck seats seem more like thrones fit for a king. Massage settings, wider cushions, thicker foams and stronger but more comfortable back supports provide drivers a better working environment.

Some manufacturers have truckers testing seats for them. Sears Seating worked with truckers for two years to determine their most wanted features, says Ron Mock, director of commercial sales and marketing.

When buying an aftermarket seat, pay close attention to these features:

Size: cushion width

"We basically try to fit 95 percent of the population," Mock says. Sears bases its designs on research including the advice of a consultant who specializes in body proportions and measured truckers to help advise Sears. The average trucker was determined to be a 6-foot-4 man weighing 280 pounds or a 5-foot-10 woman weighing 185 pounds,

Mock says, so factors such as seat width and foam density were determined to best fit a range of sizes on either side of those averages.

Seat size is sometimes limited by the cab dimensions. Seat usually range from around 19 inches to 21 inches wide, but 24-inch-wide models can be squeezed into some cabs.

Back support and cushion

Manufacturers offer better back support across the shoulders, and some companies contour seats to the shape of the spine. Air lumbar support is ergonomically safer because it prevents any direct pressure being placed on the back and spine.

A bad cushion will be uncomfortable and can cause soreness or back problems. Cushions generally are constructed of foam spread across metal or plywood, but some models have coiled springs like a mattress. Springs more evenly distribute weight across the seat surface, providing comfort for small and large drivers.

Suspension

Seat makers have done something that many cash-strapped highway departments can't do: smooth out the bumpy ride caused by uneven roads and potholes, says Raymond Miller, vice president of sales for Commercial Vehicle Group.

Seat shock absorbers can be adjusted to stiffen or loosen the suspension according to road conditions. Air suspension, using air bags within the seat, isolates drivers from the impact of road vibrations.

Adjustment

"Seats are much more comfortable and have a wider range of adjustment than they used to," Miller says. The range typically includes a 7- to 9-inch span for moving backward or forward. Bottom cushions often can be moved up and out. Drivers also can choose which tilt and recline angle of the seat back suits them best for the ultimate comfort during a long haul. The number and range of adjustments is usually greater with more expensive seats.

GET COVERED

Even if your truck is relatively new, nothing will detract from your cab's beauty more than a worn-out or torn seat. And if a spring or piece of cushion is protruding in the wrong spot, your over-the-road haul may seem a lot longer than it really is.

Because comfort is vital to your job performance, there's a wide girth of cover materials to suit anyone's taste: cloth, vinyl, velour, leather, synthetic leather. Today's fabrics are more durable and stain-resistant because of coatings and circular weaves.

Three to five years after buying a new truck, consider buying a seat cover or recovering the seat if you want the interior to look like new. Spec'ing can be as simple as ordering a replacement cover from the dealership or distributor where the seat was purchased. If the seat's pads or foam need replacing, they also can be purchased from the dealer.

Like the seat or the truck itself, your seat covering must be matched closely to the truck's application. If your long-haul duties keep you in the seat for extended hours, you may want to

choose the most comfortable cover available and leave aesthetics a distant second.

Drivers who constantly get in or out of the cab, or who are likely to track dirt into their cab, may not want leather – which can be expensive to replace, costing anywhere from \$175 to \$250.

Vinyl doesn't hold dirt or stains and is more affordable than leather, costing about \$150. It also is easier to color-match to the cab's interior panels and dashboards, which often are made of a thick vinyl. Yet vinyl tears more easily, and it can get hot in sunlight.

Cloth is easy to match, and it doesn't absorb heat or cold. According to seat experts, cloth also is softer and breathes better. But as with most fabric, dirt can get into the stitching and stay there if the covering is not properly coated or treated.

Options to leather are cheaper and animal-friendly. Ultraleather, a synthetic made of polyurethane that mimics leather's soft feel, is a product of Ultrafabrics LLC. It cleans easily with warm water or bleach, leaving no watermarks behind, and does not absorb odors. Like cloth, it stays comfortable in all temperatures.

OWNER-OPERATOR VIEW

HARVEY MORANT Beverly Hills, Calif.



After many hours in a seat that was too high, independent contractor Harvey Morant would feel gravity take its uncomfortable toll as it pulled down on his dangling legs.

Now he owns a low-rider seat that allows the 5-foot-7 Morant to rest his feet on the floor. "It makes a big difference," he says.

An engineering buff who has built race cars and refurbished trucks, Morant is keen on the technical advances that seats have made in recent years. His seat has air-bag lumbar support and adjustable arm rests that offer relief when his arms tire from hanging onto the wheel.

Morant specs seats more seriously than nearly any other truck part since virtually his whole work day takes place behind the wheel. "There's not a whole lot you can do but sit there," he says.

Special features

Seats can come with an array of arms, seat covers, heating and cooling options, and even massage controls. Seats can be ordered with one, two or no arm rests. Some arms can be folded away for maximum accessibility to the rest of the cab.

When the original upholstery wears out or just gets boring, aftermarket seat covers can be found in a variety of materials including vinyl, cloth and leather. Each manufacturer has its own color palette, but the standard options include black, gray, red, blue and brown.

INTERIOR SPECS. The interiors included in the spec listings represent the products from each manufacturer that are most popular with owner-operators. Consult a dealer for information on other models; contact information begins on Page 6.