

How to get the most out of your CB

Truckers know a CB radio helps them avoid traffic jams, bad weather and tickets, but not enough know how to get the maximum performance out of their equipment.

“Everyone considers them to be plug and play, but they’re really not,” said Matthew Brehm, a quality assurance manager for DAS Products, which manufactures [RoadKing](#) CB radios. “A little attention can boost their performance drastically.”

What kind of performance can a driver expect from a CB? In optimal conditions (flat terrain, no tall buildings, low humidity and a well-tuned setup), signals might travel seven to eight miles, Brehm said. Four miles is more typical and that might shrink to a few blocks on a humid day in downtown Chicago. While location and weather are beyond your control, there are simple things you can do to improve your CB’s performance.

Here’s a component-by-component guide to getting the most out of your setup:

Antenna

The antenna is the most critical part. It’s where signals are received and transmitted, and the type, location and tuning of the antenna are crucial to performance.

Antennas come in a variety of types and designs by materials, length and location of the coil. The antenna coils can be base-mounted, mid-mounted or top-loaded. Each type has advantages and disadvantages. Whichever type you use, make sure the coil is above the top of the truck for optimal performance (but low enough to clear underpasses and trees). RoadPro brands [Francis](#), [K40](#) and [Wilson](#) offer a variety of high-performing antennae in different models and mounts.

Radios and antennas need to be tuned to each other. RoadKing and other brands have built-in SWR (Standing Wave Ratio) meters which make this easy. Brehm said drivers should tune before every trip and certainly when getting into a different truck.

The SWR measures the amount of power being transmitted through the antenna, which determines how far the signal travels. Using the SWR meter as a gauge, incrementally lengthen or shorten the antenna until it is performing at maximum efficiency. (Detailed instructions can be found in the manual).

Unlike the radio itself, antennas, even the best ones, don’t last forever and should be replaced every few years. Keep them clean of dirt and oil and check the sheathing for any nicks or holes.

Radio

Taken care of properly, these can last for decades. Brehm said the most common performance problems are caused by a lack of grounding. Grounding was easier when more components in the cab were made of metal, but that has changed with addition of more plastic parts. He

recommends running a grounding wire from the back of the unit to a metal part in the cab that's connected to the chassis, such as a seat post bolt.

Mics

CB radios typically come with a basic dynamic mic, which most drivers discard in favor of superior, noise-canceling mics, like those made by [Astatic](#) and RoadKing. Soft-spoken drivers or those who work in particularly noisy conditions might prefer amplified mics.

Coaxial cables

It's easy to overlook the cables, but they tie the whole system together and a poor-performing cable can hurt. Make sure to get a cable with the proper connectors and one that is shielded from interference, like those made by Wilson. "The more shielding you have, the better signal you're going to get," Brehm said.

And there's one more thing Brehm would like to add to those upgrading or installing a CB radio: "Read the directions. I never used to until I started writing them and now I know how much good information is in there."

CB radios keep truckers safe and out of jams

Tom Kyrk hadn't been a professional truck driver for long before learning the worth of his CB radio.

He was hauling an empty trailer up I-390 in New York State on his way to Canada. It was the dead of winter and the wind was gusting.

"All of a sudden, the CB roared to life," he said. "Drivers were shouting, 'Hit the ramp, take the ramp, brake it down!' I rounded the corner to see traffic rapidly slowing and taking the exit ramp. A lightly loaded truck had been picked up by the wind and was perfectly perpendicular to the road. He was on all his wheels, but was blocking all the traffic lanes; both shoulders and his steer tires were in the grass median and his ICC bumper was against the concrete wall of the bridge.

"This was a case of drivers spreading the word, good following distance, and prompt reactions saving some lives and a deadly accident," said the RoadPro Pro Driver Council member.

As far as the general public is concerned, the heyday of CB radio was in the 1970s when the country was briefly and inexplicably obsessed with CBs and trucking in general. But citizens band had been a safety tool for truckers long before "*Convoy*" and *Smokey and the Bandit*, and truckers have stayed with it after the public has moved on to other fads.

In a recent RoadPro survey, 130 of 150 drivers agreed that their CB keeps them safe. "If you are any kind of driver, that CB is your best friend when you need help," commented one

respondent. “It lets us know when the traffic backs up so we don’t end up being part of the accident,” another said.

It’s true that the CB is not as ubiquitous among truckers as it used to be. Driving apps and GPS units provide directions. Cell phones keep drivers in touch with family and friends and in-cab electronics connect drivers and dispatchers. And Channel 19 can be an ear-bending barrage of preaching, arguing and gibberish.

That’s why Pro Driver Council member Joanne Fatta hasn’t bothered to get her radio fixed since it stopped working a year ago. And why Ryan Sexton got rid of his. “I got tired of hearing fellow drivers badmouth each other,” he said.

But other truckers rely on it still. No other tool offers the trucker-to-trucker communication the CB does and, despite what the cellular service commercials show, there are still plenty of places on the map without coverage.

“I love my CB,” said Maggie Riessen, a Pro Driver Council member. “I use it to find out traffic and bear reports and to check in or out at the plants. Traffic and bear reports are important because if the policeman is around traffic will slow or stop. It’s always good to be prepared for anything when you haul livestock.”

“It constantly helps,” agreed council member Libby Clayton. “I leave it squelched so I don’t hear a lot of junk, but the words ‘brake check’ get immediate attention. I start looking for the problem before I would have seen it otherwise.”

So, while cabs are more crowded with electronics and devices than ever before, it seems like truckers will always make room for the CB.

CB chatter amuses, irritates drivers

There’s something about an open mic and the open road that brings out the crazy in some people.

While it was originally developed as a safety and communications tool for truckers, CB radio was long ago adopted by people – some drivers, some not – for other purposes, including advertising, singing, preaching, arguing and politicking.

While most drivers still rely on their CBs for traffic, weather and radar checks, the often-irritating, non-relevant chatter means many of them keep it turned down or only turn it on when they need it.

But amidst all that chatter, there are a few gems. We asked RoadPro Pro Driver Council members for the most memorable conversations they’ve heard on the CB. Tom Kyrk recounts an argument between two drivers outside Amarillo, Texas.

"One driver was cussing another driver out and calling him various names. The first driver said, 'Don't call me that. Call me a moon cricket.' There was nothing but silence on the radio. Someone asked what the heck is a moon cricket? His reply, 'I have no idea, but I like the sound of it and that's what I want to be called.' Needless to say, it got everyone else laughing and shut the jerk up."

There was another time when Kyrk's ride-along got an earful:

"A teacher friend of mine was riding the truck. One day, a few drivers got into a fight on the CB. Next began a routine that would have made George Carlin proud. It was not the F word, it was the MF word. For about 10 minutes straight. They would not go more than 3 words without using MF. It was used as a noun, verb, adjective, pronoun, and I even believe as a color (still not sure how they pulled that off). At first, we were a bit offended. After a minute or two, we were laughing so hard at the absurdity of it. To this day, we still laugh about it. She even ended up taking notes; she was working in an inner city school district at the time and found their use of it impressive in that all the ways it had been used in that conversation were grammatically correct. Evidently, it became a joke at their staff meetings as to how many ways it could be used in a sentence."

As a female driver, Joanne Fatta is in a minority and frequently hears chatter from drivers who assume she is a man.

"So the guys on CB were chatting it up about a hot female in a four-wheeler. Trucker calls me on CB to tell me this driver was coming my way. So, once this trucker gets to my driver's window he realizes I'm a lady driver and apologizes for his 'check this female out' comment. Then I have one trucker pass me, see I'm female, call to his buddy behind him, tell him about me being female, then his buddy gives me a stare as he passes me. Funny stuff. Normal male behavior."

Pro Driver Council member Maggie Riessen said the funniest thing she heard was a trucker and scale operator arguing over which direction to go on a weigh scale.

"The craziest thing I heard was a driver telling 'did you hear about . . .' jokes for hours nonstop until I turned my radio off," said Fred Weatherspoon.

The CB airwaves will always attract people looking for an audience, but drivers who keep their ears on for safety reason can only hope the funny stuff keeps coming through as well.