



Automated Tarping Systems And What They Mean to You

| Sean O'Brian |

PRICING, COST OF OWNERSHIP AND WARRANTY ARE ALL FACTORS TO CONSIDER WHEN PURCHASING A TARPING SYSTEM.

While salesmen, distributors and manufacturers can all offer insight, suggestions and recommendations, the only person to decide on what system is right for you is you alone.

WHEN IT COMES TO CONSIDERING EFFECTIVE equipment for your fleet, look at outfitting your trucks with a tarping system. Tarping systems range from fully hydraulic and adjustable to fit a wide range of container sizes down to an adjustable gantry with a “window shade” style tarp return where the driver pulls the tarp out over the load. Why are they important? Three factors come to mind:

1. *Productivity*—More trips per day with a tarping system than without makes your routes more profitable because it takes less time to cover a load with a tarping system than manually covering the container (30 to 45 seconds for a fully hydraulic system versus 10 to 15 minutes hand tarping the load).
2. *Safety*—Keeping your drivers on the ground reduces work related injuries and, in turn, keeps your workers' compensation costs low.

3. *Convenience*—Covering and uncovering a load in 30 to 45 seconds keeps the driver out of the blistering sun, torrential rain and cold snow making for a happier and more productive driver.

Researching Tarping System Features

Before you jump headlong into buying the same old tarping system, you need to ask yourself some questions while also analyzing your fleet. When you go to buy a car or truck, do you rely solely on the salesman to give you your information or do you perform your own research to complement what the salesman gives you? Do you buy the same make and model each time or do you look around to see if there is anything new on the market? Buying a tarping system should be no different than buying a car or truck as each tarping system accomplishes the same thing (covering a container), but each one goes about it in totally different ways.

Below are some factors to consider before deciding on a tarping system.

Containers Size Range

Do you have a wide variety of container sizes requiring a fully adjustable tarping system or do you have one container size requiring a non-adjustable tarping system?

Cost of Ownership

Watch the equipment expenses. Sometimes the cheapest tarping systems end up costing more over the long run in truck downtime, maintenance, parts replacements, tarps, etc. Upfront pricing shouldn't be your only consideration, but a higher price doesn't necessarily mean quality either.



Magnum tarping system covering a 22' 40-yard box.
Photos courtesy of O'Brian Tarping Systems.

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Magnum, the original heavy weight, low-profile tarping system for containers 10-40 cubic yards and 24' 50 cubic yards.

Double Duty

Does your hook or cable hoist perform multiple duties when not running a garbage route? If so, will the tarping system arms be in the way of the flatbed/ water tank/etc., or be out of the way and complement the multi-function truck route?

Weight

Depending on the tarping systems' arm/pivot arrangement—if the arms are in the way or below and in front of containers and compactors—will help determine what tarping system you go with. If the arms and pivot points can potentially be in the way of containers and compactors, then a heavyweight tarping system may be your best bet. If your arms are below and in front of containers and compactors, then a lightweight tarping system may be the ideal choice. Do some of your routes routinely max out the trucks GVW rating? Are you planning on buying a new truck with a bigger motor, larger radiator and massive exhaust system to meet the latest emissions? Everything that you add to a truck will take away from the maximum payload that you can legally carry (this includes tarping systems). If you rarely maximize the GVW, then a super beefy tarping system may be the way to go. If you need all the payload capacity that you can get, perhaps a fully adjustable and lightweight tarping system is the way to go.

Features and Benefits

Be sure to look past the trade names and marketing glitz to dig down to the actual features and benefits of the tarping system. Greasing versus no greasing, arms in the way of containers and compactors or below and in front of containers and compactors or no arms at all, standard cylinders versus master/slave cylinders, telescoping arms versus elbow arms versus telescoping pivots, adjustable gantry versus standard gantry, whether the tarp roller is mounted on the tarper arms or in the gantry, straight arms versus telescoping arms versus

elbow arms, etc. The differences can be dizzying, so ask lots of questions and do some research.

Maintenance

What maintenance is required for the proper operation of the tarping system? Will the tarping system require bi-weekly greasing to stay in warranty or does it come with oil-impregnated bushings? Will the tarp wear out quicker when it is dragged out over the load or last longer if it is rolled out over the load? How much truck downtime will be caused by the tarping system's maintenance?

Warranty

How long of a warranty is necessary? There are 12, 24 and 36-month warranties on tarping equipment within the waste industry. However, the warranty is only as good as the company that stands behind it. Find out what exactly is covered by the warranty, what would be considered maintenance and what would be considered a consumable, what maintenance documentation (if any) that would need to be used to keep your system in warranty, etc.

Tarping Company

In this economy, we need to stick together and support each other instead of sending our money to an overseas manufacturer. Ask where the tarping system was manufactured and check to see if it was "Made in the USA." Is the tarping system that you are considering purchasing manufactured and supported by a small business or a multi-line corporation? Can you speak to an owner if needed? Has the tarping company experienced employee turnover to the point that you cannot get quality customer service? Can the tarping company support you? Is there an ISO 9001 QC plan in place? Can you be assured that each part is the same and that quality is held to a high standard?

If you are unfamiliar with the tarping system or brand that you are leaning towards, consult a reference guide, get referrals or ask your salesman questions, including but not limited to:

- How does it operate?
- Does it operate like it is advertised?
- Have you needed any support from the tarping company?
- What warranty issues have you had?
- Were they taken care of quickly or was it a long and drawn out process?
- What is your cost of ownership?
- Were you able to speak to a knowledgeable individual or someone who read off checklists from a book?
- What other tarping systems does the referencer have to compare the tarp system against?
- Etc.

Any tarping manufacturer should be able to supply you with references on the tarping equipment that they supply.

You Have Decided on Which Tarping system to Buy, Now What?

If you go direct, who will be there to support you locally? A dealer/distributor should be your conduit for tarping equipment sales and service as they know you, your equipment and can support you before, during and after the sale. Dealing direct can *sometimes* get you a better price, but the tarping company will not be able to support you locally when your tarping system is going haywire and you don't know where to start, etc.

Before installation, find out if your truck can have a tarping system added to it. Is there adequate room for the gantry installation? Is the exhaust system in the way? Will the DPF filter cause heat related issues? Will the hoist need to be moved back? Will the frame need to be sectioned? Is this something that you would be better off having a professional handle? Dealing with a local dealer/distributor can make the installation process easier by having them handle the purchase and installation of the tarping system. Find out from the dealer what you are required to do to keep your tarping system in warranty. This can range from bi-weekly greasing, filling out and submitting the warranty paperwork, etc. When picking up your truck, ask for the warranty sheet and installation/owner's manual. These items will come in handy when you have to service your equipment, apply for warranty and/or diagnose a problem. Ask for training from the dealer about the proper way to

use the tarping system. If training is not available directly from them, find other sources online.

What's Next?

Once your company has purchased a tarping system based on the features and style you want and it is installed and ready to go, test the tarping

system to see if the arms lift together in unison. If they do not, the system needs to have the cylinders bled, valves adjusted, tarp adjusted or cylinders re-phased. What you do is dependent upon which tarping system you have. Cylinder re-phasing can be done through the driver by holding down on the control valve for two to three minutes to



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Diablo tarping system with the arms completely below and in front of the majority of containers and compactors.

completely bleed the lifting cylinders. Manually bleeding the cylinders, valve manipulation and tarp adjustments need to be done by a qualified mechanic.

Lift the tarp roller out of the cradle and adjust the upper arms to clear the front of the container or slide the pivot forward to clear the front of the container. Rotate the tarp roller to the rear of the container. On windy days it helps to keep the tarp roller near the top of the container to minimize trash blowing out of the container. Be sure to put the tarp roller or stabilizer bar on the rear of the container, *never* past the rear edge of the container. The container acts like a support for the tarp roller minimizing arm fatigue caused by the tarp roller hanging past the container bouncing up and down. Doing this also maximizes tarp life. Be sure to “power out” the tarp roller against the container. This will minimize the tarp roller from bouncing against the container causing roller damage.

When rolling the tarp up, be sure to sit the roller in the bottom of the cradle when done. This is important because if the roller is not supported at the front, premature arm fatigue will occur resulting in bent arms (roller attached to the arms models). For models where the tarp roller is mounted to the gantry, be sure to roll the arms up completely against the gantry. Leaving the tarp rolled out some will “whip” the tarp causing premature tarp wear and potential arm damage.

Finally, train your drivers using the information provided by the dealer or use training available. Additional points for them to consider are:

- Being aware of telephone and power lines before operating the tarping system
- The tarp roller *must* be supported either at the front in the cradle or at the rear on the container.
- Untarp the load *before* trying to dump or unload the container. Nothing takes a tarp system out of commission quicker than unloading a container while the container is covered by the tarp system.
- If the arms do not move or just one moves, check to make sure that there aren't any obstructions coming from the container. If there isn't any obstructions, let maintenance know immediately so that the problem can be fixed before arm damage occurs.
- If the load is heaped above the container, one may need to use the tarp's flaps to properly secure the load. No one wants to get a littering citation or harm our environment.

Lifetime of the Tarping System

The lifetime of a tarping system depends on several factors—the variety of tarping systems currently on the market, their features and benefits, the maintenance schedule that you currently have in place, the type of load you are covering, the condition your containers are in, tarp material used, your driver's attention to detail, etc. If you have a driver who constantly has to get his truck serviced due to abuse or neglect, then no tarping system will last very long. If you have a truck that rarely requires service coupled with a driver who is meticulous and has considerable attention to detail, then you should be able to get a long life out of your tarping system. This also depends on the support that the tarping system manufacturers can give to discontinued tarper models, the technical support available for old models, etc. It is not unusual to hear of a tarping system being cut off and remounted on a different chassis when there is adequate product support with a well performing product. On average, where the tarp roller is mounted to the arms and the tarp is rolled out over the load, a tarp should expect between nine to 12 months of usage or longer. With the tarp roller mounted to the gantry and where the tarp is pulled out over the load a tarp should expect a three to five month life span.

Deciding What's Right for You

Pricing, cost of ownership and warranty are all factors to consider in this process. While salesmen, distributors and manufacturers can all offer insight, suggestions and recommendations into the decision making process, decisions should not be made solely on manufacturer's marketing, but must also include real world experience, features, benefits and customer referrals. The only person to decide on what tarping system is right for you is you alone. | **WA**

Sean O'Brian is President of O' Brian Tarping Systems (Wilson, NC) and Co-Chair of the Future Industry Leaders Alliance (FILA). O'Brian Tarping Systems is a third generation family business, is ISO9001-2000 certified and manufactures its tarps and tarping systems in-house at its headquarters. For more information, call (252) 291-2141, e-mail sales@obriantarping.com or view their driver training video at www.obriantarping.com.