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Breaking the 30 Percent Barrier

Twenty years ago, getting excavators to “Call Before You Dig (CBYD)” took some hard selling. It wasn’t that they were not concerned about hitting underground facilities; it was just that they didn’t see the need for it.

Mark-outs were scheduled over eggs and hash browns at the local café where construction and utility crew foremen all had early breakfast. Less reliable were the arrangements made at the local bar after work. If connections were not made at the usual places, a contractor could just swing by a company’s equipment yard and talk to someone there. From the excavator’s perspective, that seemed to make more sense than calling a One-Call Center that was located at the other end of the state and talking to someone who had no knowledge of the site where digging was to take place.

This face-to-face communication was part of the community social fabric. It didn’t go away easily, and maybe it still exists in some places. But today, after millions of dollars spent promoting CBYD and many steps to make it easier for excavators to use One-Call, most seem to be making the call—most, but not all.

I read a lot of accident reports, and I’ve seen the results of a couple of studies, all indicating that in 30 to 40 percent of the damages no call was made. We seem to be stalled at that level of no-calls. It almost seems like a

barrier that we can’t break through. You can look at some states individually and see better results, but not nationally.

I doubt if it’s a case of so many excavators still relying on local networks. They probably don’t exist to the extent they once did, since most facility operations are now centralized to the point where even maintenance crews are dispatched from a main equipment yard to communities many miles away. Some facility owners have policies forbidding their field people from taking locate requests. It’s a major liability issue.

So, what the heck is going on with all these accidents where no call was made? I talked to several people in the industry and was somewhat enlightened, but not totally.

One person told me that when an accident report says that no call was made, a call might actually have been made. The caller might not have given an accurate description of the dig site location. Lines were marked, but not at the point where the accident occurred. This could also happen if an operator at a One-Call Center does not enter the site information correctly. It could also happen if the excavation crew is at the site and they find they need to dig a little bit outside the marked area. I’ve witnessed that personally, and it usually results in finger pointing where the excavator says the line wasn’t marked by the line owner, and the line owner says the excavator didn’t call in for a locate at that point.

OK, but I doubt that type of scenario could fully explain a 30 to 40 percent no-call rate. There’s got to be more to it.

I offered the possibility that small and part-time excavators may not be familiar with state laws requiring them to call before digging. These are the people with rented backhoes and 10-year-old pickups (like my trusty ‘97 Dodge Ram).

I was emphatically told that I was wrong, wrong, wrong. Some people I consulted said there aren’t many small operators any more. Excavation is becoming an industry where it’s get big or get out.

That didn’t ring true for me at all. A look in the yellow pages of any phone directory shows there are a lot of small companies offering excavation services. I know of several one-person operations myself. Heck, I might rent a backhoe from time to time if there’s an opportunity to make some money.

So, I would have to say that the people who told me I was wrong about this are the ones who are wrong. There are a lot of small excavators, and it is reasonable to assume they are less likely to call than the major league pros in the big operations. You can’t

deny that they have a lot less to lose liability-wise than a company with millions of dollars worth of capital investment. Stories abound about small operators declaring bankruptcy and starting up again under a new company name.

A growing problem with no-calls is that many excavators lack English-speaking skills. This is particularly the case in the landscaping industry. State laws are typically written only in English, so excavators who are not skilled in English may not be familiar with laws requiring them to call. The same thing applies to CBYD promotions.

Yet, another reason for not calling is one that I encountered recently. I was helping a relative install a 31-inch high picket fence around part of his yard. We were not digging post holes, but were using “post stakes.” These are steel stakes with a bracket at the top for holding the posts. The pointed end that is pounded into the ground looked to be long enough to reach an underground service line. I am aware of several damages from stakes being pounded through lines, so I whipped out my cell phone and called 811. I certainly didn’t want to take a chance of being involved in damage to any underground line.

Less than two hours later, my relative gets a phone call. After hanging up, he punches me on the shoulder and said that I shouldn’t have called for a locate. His call was from the city inspections office, and he was told he needed a permit for that fence. Ironically, I can remember advocating years ago that cities reluctant to participate in One-Call should consider the extra revenue they would receive by using One-Call tickets to catch excavators who hadn’t gotten permits. I hadn’t thought about the unintended consequences of suppressing calls for locates. People know that permits for home improvements quickly go into the hands of tax assessors.

In this case, my relative was more concerned with causing neighborhood friction. His neighbor had just built a storage shed, for which he didn’t get a permit. If an inspector were sent out for the picket fence and noticed that new shed, the neighbor could find himself in a big hassle with the city. Nothing like that happened, but I can see where it could have. I’m still glad I called.

I know that these reasons for not calling, and others that I have not mentioned, are being addressed to varying degrees. However, if we are going to get down below the thirty percent barrier, we are going to have to address them more effectively and on a bigger scale. **UF**