

TRUCKING: An Essential Industry

Roma Fuels Ltd. and **Canada Cartage** share their stories about rising to the occasion, keeping their workers safe and serving others during a pandemic

When COVID-19 became apparent in Canada, all of us – governments, associations, industries, businesses, communities, families, individuals – had to figure out our place in an ever-changing world caused by unprecedented circumstance. While some industries were forced to close their doors to weather the storm, others became defined by how they could provide for and serve communities throughout the country and all over the world. The trucking industry was one of them.

Private fleets adapted to the changes, enforced their safety measures and worked hard to ensure that sectors were served, deliveries were made and shelves were stocked – all while ensuring that every single employee, operator and driver, on or off the road, was safe and cared for.

Private Motor Carrier had the opportunity to connect with two members of the Private Motor Truck Council of Canada (PMTCC) – **Lino Rollo, Chief Financial Officer of Roma Fuels Ltd.**, and **David Zavitz, Chief Administrative Officer of Canada Cartage** – and hear their stories of how each company rose to the occasion to operate as an ‘essential service,’ keep their team safe and continue to serve others through a time of uncertainty.

Describe the current landscape/operations of your company in response to COVID-19.

Lino Rollo – Roma Fuels is a fuel distributor and our main clientele is commercial businesses that either own trucking or construction fleets; those are the two main sectors that we provide fuel to. We also do heating for homes in rural areas – furnace oil and propane – which is also important during these difficult times.

We own a fleet of fuel trucks and we do ‘wheel to wheel’ fueling (i.e. direct to equipment) for the trucking and construction industry. That is, we go to their place of business during non-productive hours and fill their trucks or equipment directly, usually at night time. This allows companies to improve their fuel management and better utilize man hours. We also deliver diesel exhaust fluid (DEF) direct to equipment. For construction customers, we will go directly to their construction sites and fill their bulldozers, excavators, etc. Some companies have their own larger fuel tanks on site and we fill those as well.

“We did everything we could to make them feel safe and keep them out of harm’s way.”

David Zavitz – Overall, Canada Cartage is doing ok through the crisis. We’re a dedicated contract carrier, and our customer base includes a lot of large retail chains in the grocery, beer and liquor, pharmacy, and healthcare sectors. They’ve been busy, so we’ve been busy. In the early days of COVID-19, there was a lot of panic buying of groceries and alcohol, so it threw a massive wrench into the logistics planning for our customers and for us. But we got through those first few weeks, and we are now seeing a return to more normal volumes with the essential products businesses.

But while we are still busy in the food and beverage sectors, other parts of our business – raw materials, manufacturing, and finished products – have slowed considerably. But we are seeing signs of optimism as these customers start – slowly – to gear up their production.

Have you implemented any new precautions to protect your drivers?

Lino Rollo – Our drivers are operating under reduced hours. Rather than laying people off, we asked the drivers if they were willing to share the remaining hours amongst themselves. So we went to a reduced workweek, where drivers would take off a day or two, depending on how that week went. The feedback has been good so far, which is encouraging to know that people are willing to work with each other to get through this together. All for one and one for all, so to speak.

We secured PPE for the drivers – masks, hand sanitizer, and sanitizing wipes – and made sure that they had enough of each. We also ensured that the area, where drivers go to change, is completely sanitized and all the trucks have been detailed and completely cleaned, from top to bottom.

Anything we can do to make the drivers feel safe – this was very important to us: to ensure that we did everything we could to make them feel safe and keep them out of harm’s way.

We staggered their start times, so there was only one driver in the driver room at a time to maintain social distancing.

“There were four keys to our plan to help protect our drivers and front-line staff: process changes, physical environment changes, procurement, and communication.”

We told our customers that during this time, please maintain social distancing from our drivers, and we suspended collecting signatures for now – not sharing paper, tablets, pens – to reduce any risk of spreading the virus.

David Zavitz – There were four keys to our plan to help protect our drivers and front-line staff: **process changes, physical environment changes, procurement, and communication.** All four of these elements are necessary to protect our people.

On the process side, we implemented truck sanitization SOPs for dispatchers and drivers to be followed at the start of each shift. This includes giving drivers a pre-soaked ‘rag in a bag’ with a disinfectant that is approved by Health Canada to kill the coronavirus within three minutes of contact. They apply it to their key fob and all high-touch areas of their tractor. We changed our dispatch processes to eliminate hand-to-hand paperwork transfers. We also created a ‘Facility Action Plan,’ which guides local management on the steps to take should an employee be suspected or confirmed of having COVID-19, with cleaning protocols and communication procedures so that we keep all staff safe and informed of what’s happening.

For physical environment changes, we have done a number of things. The first thing we did was get as many staff working from home as possible, which we accomplished very quickly. We also have instituted physical changes in our terminals and distribution centres, including installing plexiglass in many dispatch areas, floor markers to remind staff to stay apart, physical barriers to eliminate close contact, and limiting or eliminating seating in our lunch rooms. We also increased the frequency of regular cleaning and disinfecting of our buildings.

For procurement, our safety department has done an amazing job securing PPE and sanitization supplies for our staff. To date, we have purchased:

- 6,000 Litres of Health Canada-approved disinfectant,
- Over 30,000 face masks – both disposal and re-usable,
- 63,000 pairs of nitrile gloves,
- 5,000 bottles of hand sanitizer, and
- 140,000 alcohol-based wipes in individual packs.

And finally, we are trying to communicate with our drivers and staff as frequently and openly as possible. To get immediate information to and from the field, we were holding daily 30-minute calls each morning with managers from across the country to see how our employees and customers are doing. We’re continuously updating staff on personal safety measures to take. We’ve distributed seven COVID-19 email updates to all employees, and recently, we held a ‘Town Hall’ conference call and invited all 3,500 employees to attend. Our drivers are on the road all day, and it’s scary times, so we want them to know that we’ve got their back and are doing everything we can to protect their safety.

What is it like for your fleet on the road right now?

Lino Rollo – With our office staff, we’ve asked some people to work from home so we only have a skeleton staff in the office to maintain operations. The rest of the staff are home and, luckily enough, all of our IT systems are ‘in the cloud’ now. A few years ago, we decided to move everything over to the cloud in the event that there was a business interruption such as this one. If the servers are all on-site, and there’s a fire in the office, you can’t operate; so everything is on the cloud, which has helped us facilitated working from home.

We also had a meeting with the staff to speak openly about what their concerns and fears are – in terms of the current environment – and it allowed for everyone to hear what each of us was feeling and for us to mitigate any risk and concerns people had. We went around the table and everyone had the opportunity to say how they were feeling, what their concerns were, what they’re worried about, and what they’re doing to mitigate the risks at home. It’s fine to put controls and procedures in place at work but what are people doing at home? If you’re not being responsible at home, you can bring the virus to work and expose the few people that are there. I thought that really eased the tension here in the office and everyone felt at ease after that.

David Zavitz – There is a certain amount of anxiety for our drivers on the road right now, but they are a resilient team and are continuing to get the job done. Finding restaurants and rest stops that are open is a challenge, but many of our customers are understanding and offering facilities for our drivers. On the bright side, drivers are loving the fact there’s less traffic!

Roma Fuels Ltd. has operated for over 50 years!
50 years in the industry must have presented its challenges – could you share a story or two that shows how resilient Roma Fuels is, 50 years strong?

Lino Rollo – Nothing compares to what we’re seeing in this current crisis now – not just in our industry but across the world – but for us, there was a point in time during the 80s, where we were at a fork in the road. The Government introduced a program for people to convert from furnace oil to natural gas in their home; so they started building a pipeline and giving grants to people. At that time, in Roma Fuel’s history, we were mainly a home heating company, not handling commercial fuel. We were delivering furnace oil to homes in Toronto. When the Government implemented this new program, there was a rush and people started accepting the grant. So when that happened, our home heating business started to go into decline.

After thinking, “What are we going to do?” we decided to venture into the commercial business. 90% of our business was home heating so we had to pivot away from that sector to service the commercial fuel business, which is mostly transportation and construction-related businesses. That was a major obstacle that we faced in our 50-year history.

Since Canada Cartage has operated for 106 years and faced other challenging times in history – World War One, The Great Depression and World War Two – could you share a story or two that shows how resilient Canada Cartage is and has always been?

David Zavitz – Canada Cartage was founded in 1914, so the company has survived some incredibly tough periods in our country's history – World War One, the Spanish Flu, The Great Depression, World War Two, and all the other economic downturns since then that are a natural part of the economy. This pandemic is the biggest economic, societal, and health challenge to face our generation. It's easy to get pessimistic and worry that the future may not be bright but I think it helps to belong to a company that has seen worse, and endured it for longer periods, and got through it. Doesn't mean it was easy then, or that it will be easy now, but we did get through it. That history can serve as a guidepost for people: we did it before and we can do it again.

What is Roma Fuels doing to ensure that fleets are fuelled during these times?

Lino Rollo – 15 years ago, we decided to offer wheel-to-wheel refuelling, which is different than fuelling tanks. We go and directly fuel fleets at night by filling up trucks with diesel and diesel-exhaust fluid. In this environment, one thing we're trying to do is service trucks so drivers don't have to go to a rest stop, gas station or a commercial car lot to fuel. If we do the fuelling for them, that's one less touch point to contracting the virus.

This is something we want to emphasize with our customers: if you're concerned about your drivers and want to keep them safe, we'll do the fuelling for you. We'll come at night so that your drivers don't have to go to a public rest stop, gas station or truck stop. People are seeing the value of that now and I think even more so in the future, given that the virus might be with us for awhile.


What is Canada Cartage doing to ensure that businesses and communities are served during this time?

David Zavitz – I have to say that we are incredibly proud of our entire team – drivers, dispatchers, managers, and all of the back-office staff who keep the company humming. Our people realize how critical they are to keep the shelves stocked for our neighbours and our own families. In spite of the uncertainty and risk, they continue to work hard for our customers. It's amazing to see. It reminds you that going to work can mean more than just 'a job' – it can serve an important purpose in helping others during these chaotic times.

How would you like to see the industry and the public recognize the trucking industry today and in the future.

Lino Rollo – I like a lot of things that are going on right now. You have #thankatrucker on social media and I'm glad to see that a lot of truck and rest stops are open and people are trying to help by serving and having food available to them. Because at the end of the day, these guys are on the road – long-hauling – and they need places to stop, eat and rest. If places are closed down, it's very difficult for them to stay on the road. I think that's very important to keep those truck/rest stops open and have food available for them.

I'd also like to see truckers grouped with the other front line workers and have immediate access to testing and PPE. It wasn't easy for us to find our PPE; we had to look far and wide for it. These things need to be available for the trucking industry – especially when they're deemed essential, front line workers.

David Zavitz – It's natural that we all take a lot of everyday things for granted. We don't think very often about how we get our food, gasoline, medicine, toilet paper, or other essentials. They are just 'there' when we need them. COVID-19 has been a wake-up call for the public to recognize the vital role that truck drivers and trucking companies play in our everyday lives. I hope people will remember this for a long time. 



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